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PATH-TO CONQUEST



The reptilian Visitors
plan to bring
humanity to its knees—
send freezing death
across the world!

FIRST PUBLICATION IN ANY FORM

Prologue

The saucer-shaped starship hovered effortlessly, two miles high over Southern California's night-shrouded coast. Deep within the massive vessel, its antigrav drive system quietly held the ship above a world Diana still hoped to conquer.

In the darkness of the commander's cabin, Diana stretched under the covers of her bed. Her partner, a junior officer stripped of his human disguise, slept curled in a protective ball, his back toward her. Soft as silence, she ran a finger along his shoulder and watched the muscles under his green-scaled hide ripple in reflex.

Then she slid the covers aside and touched her own pale skin, marveling at how sensitive the Visitor scientists had made this bioplastic casing. She thought back to her first reaction at being enclosed in this glove: *Ugly! I want my own face back!*

But she'd grown accustomed to it, even developed an appreciation for the alien beauty of the human form. Diana slipped out of bed and tiptoed to the mirror on one wall, then lifted her arms over her head and caressed the full length of her supple torso. Smooth skin had a certain fascinating grace that Visitors' scales lacked—the contrast of textures added a thrilling new element to making love with one of her own kind. And she'd found humans mostly incapable of anything other than terror when confronted with a natural-looking Visitor. So as long as she felt an occasional urge to seduce a human—of either gender—it was necessary to maintain her own human appearance.

She turned from the mirror, then allowed herself a last lingering glance. “You’re awfully beautiful, no matter which species you look like,” she whispered, giving her reflection a wry half smile.

Diana reached for a robe at the foot of the bed and wrapped it around herself. Then she padded to the computer console and touched a button. The screen came on, glowing with subdued green lettering. Shadows danced on the far wall as she punched up the bridge communications channel and the words faded out, to be replaced by a view of the control deck. A blond officer stood with her back to the screen, gesturing to a subordinate male and watching him hurry off to follow her

orders.

“Lydia,” said Diana, her voice soft but commanding nonetheless.

The blond officer’s shoulder slouched with a studied insouciance, and she turned casually to face Diana’s image on the bridge screen. “Why, Commander, I didn’t expect to see you at this time of night. I thought you had a guest for the sleep period.”

“I still do,” Diana said evenly. “But we spent a substantial part of the time engaged in other than sleep, and he’s tired now.”

“Pity,” Lydia deadpanned. “You should be more sensitive to the needs of your partners.”

Diana smiled imperiously. “I didn’t bring him here to see to his *needs*, Lydia. And I didn’t call you to discuss my social activities. I want a progress report.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Diana spotted a covered plexiglass serving dish left over from dinner. Four small mice were still inside it, wriggling as they tried to gain a foothold on the container’s slippery sides, vainly attempting escape. While watching Lydia sit in the command seat on the bridge, Diana absently reached for one of the mice. Tail grasped between her fingertips, she held the terror-stricken creature at her upturned lips.

“Snacking at this hour, Diana?” Lydia clucked her tongue disapprovingly. “Better watch that human waistline of yours.” “I burned off quite a bit of energy tonight, Lydia, dear. But I appreciate your concern. Now get on with your report.” She popped the mouse into her mouth and chewed it for a moment before letting it slide down her throat.

“The six ships involved in Project Icewind have completed their final preliminary study. I checked the results over and they do look promising. My recommendation is—”

“Is something I didn’t ask for. I’ll look at the results myself.”

“Very well, Commander,” Lydia said sullenly. “The human convoy in the North Atlantic is turning toward the south, at last report.”

“Finally. Is the strike team standing by?”

Lydia nodded. “Per your orders—on full alert.”

“Good. If Project Icewind can accomplish its goals, the humans are in for a very chilly surprise. Tell the strike team to prepare for launch in one hour—just before dawn East Coast time. That will be all, Lydia.”

Diana cut the channel and her computer terminal displayed green lettering again. She sat back in a plush lounge and her robe fell open. With a probing look, she patted her taut stomach.

“Watch my waistline,” she snorted to herself. Then she reached for another mouse and sensuously slid it past her lips, savoring the taste.

Chapter 1

August 25—the North Atlantic

The giant aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Nimitz* cruised purposefully through swells far more gentle than Captain R. W. Felix had any right to expect. At ninety thousand tons she was the largest warship in the world. As a seagoing city housing more than six thousand men, and a floating air base for a hundred planes and helicopters, she was built for stability. But for the small amount of ocean motion Captain Felix could sense as he lay in his bunk, his ship might well have been resting at anchor in some protected harbor.

The calm before the storm? he wondered. In better than twenty-five years at sea, that was one cliché he'd never been able to prove or dispel. Still, as rough as the North Atlantic could be, even in late summer, Felix knew that any storm the *Nimitz* and her task force might yet face would not be weather related. It would come from the sky all right, but it would take the form of fighters launched from the Mother Ships of the invading aliens called the Visitors.

Reptilian creatures in human guise, they had come once, nearly three years ago now, ostensibly in friendship. Their real purpose, of course, had been conquest. That invasion had been repelled, but a year later the Visitor expeditionary force returned—weaker, in disarray, many of the Mother Ships and skyfighters gone from the fleet. But still a formidable battle group.

The second wave of attack, the heroic struggles by a world still weary from its first interplanetary war but buoyed by confidence gained from the earlier victory, the irregular effectiveness of the red-dust toxin that had driven the Visitors away that first time—this was all history now, a part of human folklore that would someday grow to legend, *if* humanity survived the new invasion.

Felix had always been a student of history. He believed any good military commander had to be, had to understand not just the causes and effects of past battlefield clashes, but also how those battles affected and were affected by the world at large. He was certain that *every* shot was a shot heard round the world.

The *Nimitz* anchored a force that surrounded a pair of oil supertankers,

protecting the precious black gold needed to fuel virtually every part of Earth's war effort. This shipment was going from England's plentiful North Sea deposits to America. As Captain Felix knew only too well, the red-dust toxin remained virulent only in areas where consistently cold winters enabled the man-made bacteria to become dormant and regenerate annually. Unfortunately, a substantial portion of America's oil came from wells in the South and Southwest, and off the warm Gulf Coast—contested territory at best, and under the aliens' iron domination at worst.

But the northern industrial cities of the United States were still under human control, and they were centers of production for weapons and war materiel. They needed continuous supplies of fuel to keep up maximum output, so nations with secure crude oil reserves shipped it where it was required. Transporting crucial supplies by oceangoing tanker was dangerous, but running out of fuel for factories presented bleak alternatives.

Felix had made this run twice before. To cover the task force, resistance fighters all over the world stepped up their terrorist actions to keep Visitor forces from being free to strafe ships that strategists deemed little more than helpless targets.

Not that he minded that extra bit of assistance, but Felix bridled at the suggestion that his convoy was just so much iron waiting to be turned to scrap by alien lasers. His flagship alone could muster dozens of the finest, fastest, and most heavily armed jet fighters in the world. The F-14 Tomcats might not have antigrav propulsion systems, but they could still maneuver nearly as well as the alien skyfighters, and each plane had radar that would direct attacks on six targets simultaneously while they were a hundred miles away. Hawkeye radar planes could go aloft and give a 250-mile warning of approaching attackers. And land-based planes were circling in wide reconnaissance—F-15 Eagles, the fastest fighters on Earth, capable of accelerating in a flash to over 1,600 miles per hour.

And that was just the air power at Captain Felix's command. Off the flanks of his flagship, he could call on pairs of cruisers, destroyers, and frigates, all equipped with surface-to-air guided missiles. The Mother Ships could produce energy fields that made the SAMs and air-to-air missiles useless, but the skyfighters were vulnerable. Phoenix, Sidewinders, and Sparrows had all proved their deadly accuracy in past encounters.

With an audible cracking of bones, Felix leaned out of bed one leg at a time. He

narrowed his steel-gray eyes at the red numbers on his digital alarm clock. He had a full hour before he had to be on the bridge to relieve his exec, but he was too nervous to fall back asleep and the last thing he wanted to do was lie in bed and stare at the bulkheads. He quickly dressed in his white uniform, brushed his thick black hair into a semblance of discipline, and headed for the flight deck.

As big as the supercarrier was, it had too many people aboard and too much to carry to devote much space to corridors, which were low and narrow, crisscrossed with pipes and conduits. A single continuous passageway might be several blocks long, broken only by open hatchways. In some spots two broad-shouldered seamen couldn't pass at the same time. The most heavily traveled corridors were painted pleasant light colors like blue or yellow to relieve the feeling of incipient claustrophobia. *Nice try*, thought the captain, *but it doesn't work*.

Despite being twenty decks or so from bottom to top, the *Nimitz* had no elevators except for the ones used to haul planes from hangar deck to flight deck. So Felix went up the same way every crewman did—hand over hand up a long succession of ladders. *I'd like to think it keeps me young*, he thought, but his own wheezing told him otherwise.

On the way the captain passed the “shopping mall”—the passageway with stores, barbershops, and snack bars. He made a mental note to stop off during his lunch break and telegraph flowers and candy home. He'd been married to the Navy for the same twenty-five years he'd been married to Suzanne. Remembering this anniversary while at sea on a difficult mission should be worth a few marital Brownie points once he got back home.

He pulled himself up one more endless ladder and took a deep breath. *Finally!* The tang of salt spray flared his nostrils as he emerged onto the thousand-foot-long flight deck two-thirds of the way back toward the ship's stem. The carrier's superstructure, housing the bridge and flight-control decks, rose directly overhead, a hundred feet high against the dim predawn sky.

Felix turned to find Master Helmsman Matt Reinhold standing at the spindly railing bordering the deck's starboard edge. Reinhold snapped a crisp salute. Felix returned it. “What're you doing on deck, Helmsman? We've got an hour till watch.”

Reinhold shrugged. “I might ask you the same thing, sir,” he said, grinning. He brushed a strand of blond hair under the bill of his baseball cap.

“Fair enough, son. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Me neither, Captain. I mean, I shouldn’t be nervous. Hell, we were in the Middle East, with those crazy Iranians and Iraqis shootin’ at each other and every oil tanker in sight.” “Yeah, but even if they were lunatics, at least they were *our* lunatics—not lizards from a planet around Sirius.”

The young helmsman chuckled. “In a weird sorta way, that’s got me psyched. I mean, the Iranians and the Iraqis weren’t necessarily out to get *us*. Know what I mean, sir? But these Visitors—hell, they’re here for one thing. They’re gunnin’ for *us*. That really gets me pissed off, you know?”

Felix nodded. “Yes, son, I know exactly what you mean. Gets me mad, too.”

They turned to watch an E-2 Hawkeye being readied for a surveillance flight. Its folded wings were straightened and locked into place. The rotating radar dome attached to the top of the fuselage looked almost like a small, flattened replica of a Visitor Mother Ship. The four-bladed Allison turboprop engines were started, their humming blanketing the otherwise quiet flight deck.

The captain jerked a thumb toward the bridge high up in the superstructure. “Shall we go, Mr. Reinhold?”

“Whatever you say, Captain.”

They entered the hatchway and climbed up the ladders to the control room. Executive Officer Rollie Jensen stood next to the wheel, his arms folded. “Tad early, Cap’n,” he said in his Texas twang.

Felix managed a soft smile. “Early bird catches the Visitors, Mr. Jensen.”

“Just hope the lizards don’t catch *us*,” said Helmsman Dan Wilson, the stocky black crewman now at the wheel.

Wilson didn’t mind relinquishing his post a few minutes early, and Captain Felix officially relieved Exec Jensen. “Maintain course, Mr. Reinhold.”

The towheaded helmsman placed his hands firmly on the wheel as he checked the large compass in the center of the control panel. “Maintaining, Captain.”

Jensen joined his commanding officer at the bridge windows, which slanted out from bottom to top to give a better view of the flight deck stretching out for four acres around the bridge island. The first glimmers of daybreak were visible off the port stem.

“Can’t stand this damn waitin’,” Jensen murmured, almost to himself.

“Rather fight?” Felix asked softly.

The exec turned. “Naw, Cap’n. Didn’t mean *that*, sir. Just wish we was back in port already.”

“You and me and six thousand other guys on this ship,” Felix said with a reassuring smile. He slipped his baseball cap off and ran a hand through his hair. He wondered why he ever bothered to comb it. He thought momentarily of his wife kidding him about unkempt hair. “*Better than no hair*,” she’d say. God, how he missed her. More than he ever had during his earlier years at sea, more than during the heavy fighting in Vietnam, more than the tense duty off the Arabian Peninsula— so eloquently dubbed “Gonzo Station” by the sailors who’d patrolled the area to keep the Strait of Hormuz open to oil shipping.

And here they were, still worried about goddamned oil. But this was different. Felix had grown up after World War II, and that war had been the last time the United States had felt truly vulnerable in any military sense. The near-fatal blow of Pearl Harbor started things off badly—one of his uncles had been among those killed aboard the battleship *Arizona*—and the overwhelming Nazi war machine had gotten enough of a head start that Germany had appeared unstoppable for the first two years of American fighting in Europe.

A draw in Korea and the debacle of Vietnam had tarnished Uncle Sam more than a bit, but those were scaled-down conflicts. They never cut to the heart of the matter: America *could* defend herself if she really had to. When Felix had commanded the *Nimitz* near the Persian Gulf, he’d known the possibilities that Iran might send suicide planes to attack his task force. But he’d never doubted for an instant that this majestic vessel and her men could fend off any nation or force daring to take them on. In war games, facing hypothetical and equal Soviet adversaries, Felix still believed the crews under his command could win, no

matter what the circumstances. The enemy might speak a different language and fight under a foreign flag, but he was still human, and no human battallions could outgun the United States armed forces. *We might not always win*, Felix had thought, *but we'll always live to fight another day*.

The Visitors were not human. Their weapons were not variations of our weapons. And try as he might, Captain Felix couldn't banish his own uncertainties. He just hoped it didn't show.

"Hawkeye's ready to fly, Cap'n," said Jensen, holding the intercom phone in his hand.

Felix gave himself a mental shake. Daydreaming on the bridge was no way to conceal his doubts. "Okay, Rollie. Cleared for takeoff. Have the other flight crews power up."

Jensen's expression clouded. "Sir?"

"I just have this feeling. We've turned southwest, closer to Visitor territory. I think if they're going to hit us, it's going to be soon."

"Aye, aye, Cap'n."

As his exec relayed his instruction, Captain Felix started to chuckle. Helmsman Reinhold gave him a sidelong glance. So did several other crewmen on the bridge. Finally, Jensen put the phone back in its cradle.

"Beggin' the Cap'n's pardon, but what's so funny, sir?"

Felix took a breath to regain his composure. "Well, I was just thinking about how much the world needs this oil we're escorting, and how nice it is that the *Nimitz* is nuclear and we don't have to worry about such mundane matters as refueling. But then I remembered that our nuclear fuel was supposed to be good for thirteen years and she was launched twelve years ago--"

Jensen nodded. "So we got one year til! the needle points to E."

"Yeah," said Felix, "and I just conjured up this image of pulling her into a filling station on Main Street back home and saying to the kid at the pump, 'Fill 'er up, son.'"

The hangar and flight decks ignited with activity after the call from the bridge. The strategy worked out by Felix and planners from the remnants of the Defense Department had the fastest jets, the F-14 Tomcats, go up first. At their top speed of over 1,400 miles per hour, they could join the F-15s already in the air and fan out to cover great distances. If they met any Visitors approaching, they could engage the enemy far enough away to create a buffer zone around the ships. The slower attack aircraft—the A-7 Corsairs—would then go aloft to fill that buffer.

Some deck crews moved other planes out of the way, making room for the full complement of Tomcats to be lined up at the runways, one of which ran from one end of the ship to the other. The second angled out from the port side.

Watching from the bridge, Felix saw the first Tomcat being readied, rolled to the flight line, and hooked to the catapult shuttle protruding from the deck in its slot, which ran the length of the runway. All around, jet engines fired up, blowing billows of exhaust out over the great ship's sides. Hot fumes shimmered in the pink light of sunrise. Deck crews wearing heavy "Mickey Mouse" ear-protecting headpieces scurried around and under the Tomcats, the planes' distinctive doublefinned tails wavering like mirages in the heat from their own (win engines).

In green jerseys and goggles, the men of the holdback crew squirmed under the F-14's belly and attached a cable tying the craft to the deck until launch time. Ear-splitting noise prevented verbal communication on a carrier's flight deck. Experienced hands waved signals with the sort of certainty gained from long practice. One man held the cable steady while a second lay on his back directly under the plane to slip the tension bar into place. Their task completed, they scrambled out and away.

In the Tomcat's cockpit, the pilot applied light thrust to build up tension. Beside the runway, a yellow-clad plane director stood with hands on hips, awaiting signals relayed from the flight controllers atop the superstructure island.

On the bridge, Jensen handed the captain the phone receiver, connecting them to the control room one deck higher in the tower.

"Launch when ready," Felix ordered.

The F-14's engines thundered to full power. In five seconds the catapult fired, whipping the Tomcat to a speed of 160 miles an hour in less than three hundred

feet. The holdback bar snapped, allowing the jet's thrust to hurtle the plane toward the deck's edge and into the air. Afterburners kicked in for maximum speed, and flaming exhaust lit the sky like matched, retreating suns.

The Tomcat rolled and climbed steeply to join the F-15 Eagles flying in a miles-wide escort and recon circle.

From his perch, Felix felt a poetry in the process of sending jets screaming off a carrier, but down on the flight deck, poetry was transcended by urgency. The next F-14 was ready to go, and the next one after that was swinging into place.

When a dozen were up, the Hawkeye radar plane broke its silence: "*Visitor craft approaching, eleven o'clock.*"

The terse message gave Captain Felix a chill. There would be combat after all. The call went to all ships and planes— *battle stations!*

The Hawkeye crew filled in the details—fifteen Visitor skyfighters approaching at high speed. Twenty-four American fighter planes split into groups designed to cover all angles of defense and attack. The *Nimitz* combat information center confirmed what Felix knew should be happening. The men flying those jets were superbly trained, the best in the service. He could only pray that would be good enough.

On the cruisers, destroyers, and frigates, guided-missile crews waited. They were the last line of defense if the planes couldn't stop the Visitors.

And in the center of this ring of awesome air and sea fire power, the pair of oil tankers steamed along, their captains all too aware that the fates of their vessels were about to be decided by deadly force.

Lieutenant Commander Ricky Picolo flew the lead F-14. Craning his neck, he peered through the cockpit canopy. He still hadn't made visual contact with the enemy, but his targeting computer sure had. It had picked six out of the two dozen it had been tracking. They were in his hundred-mile firing range and closing fast.

His dark mustache twitched inside his oxygen mask, the way it always did when he sensed it was time to do the job. "Leader Abel Twelve, ready to engage," he said, his voice crackling over the speakers of all the planes and ships in the

convoy. “And . . . firing!”

Picolo pressed the buttons and the Tomcat’s computers did the rest, sending a fusillade of electronically guided missiles rocketing toward the alien invaders. As the planes around him followed his lead, Picolo hoped they could grab the offensive by pressing the attack before the Visitors could get close to the ships down below.

At Mach two, it doesn’t take long to cover a hundred miles. The jet fighters veered off to avoid getting too near to Visitor lasers, while their air-to-air missiles homed in at three times the speed of sound.

“All right, fellas,” Picolo radioed, “get ready on cannons, time for a little down-and-dirty dogfighting.”

Explosions signaled the arrival of the missiles as five of the fifteen Visitor fighters were hit and destroyed outright. Picolo’s surprise had worked. “Don’t get cocky, boys. Abel Thirteen, Fourteen and Fifteen, cover me. I’m going right down their throats.”

Chapter 2

Given a choice, Nicholas Draper would have preferred leaving the government of the United States right where it had been for two hundred years or so. But the Secretary of State knew the Visitors had given them little choice. Washington, D.C., was simply too close to southern regions where the aliens were able to fight without being affected by the toxic red dust. Though the capital itself *was* under the toxin's protective veil, President William Brent Morrow and his advisers had been forced to conclude that for safety's sake, they'd better relocate to New York. It was almost like the Civil War, when the White House was little more than a carriage ride from the Confederate capital at Richmond, Virginia, and within striking distance of Robert E. Lee's gray-coated troops.

Abe Lincoln had stayed put, but the present-day analogy wasn't what Draper could call exact. Visitors didn't attack on horseback.

A dapper Virginian himself, Secretary Draper had learned to accept the rightness of the North's Civil War victory, but like many southerners, he still harbored a wisp of sympathy for the Johnny Rebs who'd fought and died for Dixieland. He fell back on that vestigial patriotism to explain his vague unease at moving to the heart of Yankee territory—the *home of Yankee Stadium, for crissak.es*—with President Morrow and the rest of what was left of the country's federal authority.

Nick Draper readily agreed that New York possessed other advantages in time of global war. It was still the center of world communications, for one thing. The three television networks based there had maintained news and entertainment broadcasts, on a somewhat curtailed basis, and the Freedom Network also operated from this most secure of human-held cities in America.

And the United Nations was located here, making this city the *de facto* capital of the World Liberation Front. Morrow had set up his offices in the UN, overlooking the East River. He and the other officials of his provisional government had taken up residence in the Grand Hyatt Hotel, a few blocks away at Forty-second Street and Lexington Avenue.

The diminutive Draper had turned to jogging for exercise and solitude long before the sport became obnoxiously common, and he'd cherished his early

morning runs in the rolling hills surrounding his country estate in Virginia. Somehow, lacing on his Nikes had lost something in the translation to Manhattan Island. There were no grassy fields, except in Central Park, and the idea of solitary tranquility was laughable here. New York had retained much of its hurly-burly personality, and the streets were never empty. Garbage trucks still roamed from dumpster to trash can, although at less regular intervals. Cabs and buses still dueled fender to fender and horn to horn, vying like wild animals for the right-of-way on streets cratered with potholes.

And miraculously, people still came out each day to go to their jobs. Visitors or not, this corner of the globe went on with life as usual.

However, it wasn't life without changes. Its status of secure capital made New York City the eventual goal of hundreds of thousands of refugees from the warmer states where the Visitor forces ravaged at will, undaunted by the red dust fencing them off at the frostline.

On this muggy morning at seven, Nick Draper found himself confronted with part of that new reality as he jogged near Penn Station with Stuart Hart, the youthful acting Secretary of Defense, and Cynthia Sobel, Morrow's press secretary. Wearing a U.S.A. T-shirt and blue shorts banded with red and white, Draper led his companions south on Seventh Avenue. Traffic was cordoned off inside a four-block radius because of the vast numbers of immigrants spilling up staircases and escalators from the railroad station's extensive maze of underground arcades and platforms. Police on foot and horseback manned the barricades, keeping people from unauthorized passage out of the terminal zone. Without vehicular traffic to dodge, the trio of anonymous government officials jogged in the street.

As they slowed, Cynthia Sobel abruptly half fell, half sat on the curb. "Shit!" she hissed as she hit the concrete hard.

Tall buildings blocked the early morning sun from this portion of the sidewalk, and Draper leaned over her in the shadows. "Y'all okay, hon?"

She grasped an amber beer bottle that appeared to be lying innocently in the road, held it out distastefully, then heaved it at a trash basket four feet away. It arced over the rim, rattled against the wire mesh, and clattered to a rest inside.

"I've been ambushed," she said, waving in dismay at several other bottles, cans,

and papers littering the curbside pavement. She adjusted the sweat-soaked headband holding her permed dark hair out of her eyes, then gingerly swiveled her ankle and winced in pain.

Stu Hart frowned in sympathy. His T-shirt hung loosely over his lanky frame. “Should we shoot you here, m’dear?” Hart’s erudite, pinched tone betrayed upper-crust origins and a youth misspent in prep schools.

Cynthia’s thin nose curled in frustration. “Manhandled by trash,” she grumbled.

“Humm, many’s the lady who’s made *that* claim,” he quipped, boyish eyes twinkling beneath brows bushy enough to require occasional combing. Those brows were the only incongruous features of a blandly handsome face.

“Funny man,” Sobel said sarcastically.

Draper reached out to help her up.

“Thanks,” she said, favoring the twisted ankle. “I suppose’ it’s too much to ask to have the streets cleaned. I swear I hear garbage trucks plying the streets every night. Damned if I know what they’re doing out there, other than waking me up.”

“Well, hon, we are a nation at war,” said Draper. “Just ask *them*.” He pointed toward Penn Station’s main entrance across the street from their resting place. Forlorn groups of new arrivals waited on the sidewalk, their eyes seeking help wordlessly, hopelessly.

The station’s aboveground edifice, classical nineteenth century architecture notwithstanding, had long since been bull-do7.ed to make room for the drum-shaped Madison Square Garden sports arena and its attendant glass and steel office lowers. But below Manhattan’s midtown streets, the train station bustled with travelers. Today’s passengers were different from the ones who’d made up the bulk of business here before the war.

In better times Penn Station had served as a commuter’s hub, accommodating workers going between New York’s central borough and their suburban homes in New Jersey and Long Island—several hundred thousand daily. Thousands of other passengers arrived and departed on longer-distance Amtrak journeys to and from all parts of the continent.

Draper had enjoyed train travel himself when he'd had the time, before becoming Secretary of State. With his keen eye for detail, he'd never minded whiling away free time at terminals like this one, just watching people go by. It wasn't hard to tell different types of travelers apart. Local commuters carried slim briefcases and moved briskly, as if set on a track themselves, following identical routes every day, home to office and back again. Tourists lugged suitcases and tote bags filled to bursting, their weary arms hugging extra shopping bags filled with gifts for the folks back home.

Commuters' faces encompassed two main expressions, it seemed—blase and dulled by the lull of routine transport; or annoyed, the result of trains delayed, schedules disrupted, meetings missed. Long distance voyagers' faces were bathed in excitement or anticipation, depending on whether they were coming or going.

But the faces of refugees never seemed to change from war to war, earthquake to earthquake, famine to famine. African, European, Asian, or American, it didn't matter. Draper had seen photos of earlier times and witnessed similar human suffering in person in various parts of the world. Never before had war forced Americans to flee their homes, and it shook him to find that citizens of the most powerful nation in the history of the planet could be reduced to this, faces shadowed by grief and fear.

We're not immune, he thought.

"Where do they all go?" Stuart Hart asked, serious now.

Cynthia flexed her leg. "The lucky ones have relatives or friends in the area and stay with them."

"What about the unlucky ones?"

"Haven't you seen the billboards and TV commercials? 'Take in a friend—then make room for a stranger'?"

"Is it working?" asked Draper.

Cynthia nodded. "Pretty well, from what I hear. At the beginning people were just flooding into the city, living in subway stations and on park benches. It was like having bag ladies replicating like rabbits."

“Yes, I noticed when I went running,” Hart said distastefully.

“Well,” Cynthia continued, “the mayor and the governor realized this couldn’t go on. That’s when they converted Madison Square Garden into a refugee center and blocked off Penn Station.”

“What about people who don’t come in by train?” Hart said.

“A lot of them wind up here anyway, once they find out it’s a place to stay—and a place where they’ll help you get more permanent housing. I’m *from* New York,” Cynthia boasted, “and we’re pretty good at coming through when the chips are down.”

“What about people who don’t get taken in?” Hart said.

“Well, they go to camps out in the suburbs. Old military bases, unused college dorms, hospitals or prisons that were closed down. Some are just tents and Quonset huts.” She took a deep breath. “The President sent me out to one on Long Island last week. All things considered, people are making the best of it. The worst part is, there aren’t anywhere near enough jobs for all these people—and more and more keep coming.”

Just then, a slightly battered Cadillac limo pulled over to the curb in front of the main station entrance. The doors swung open. Draper squinted, straining to make out faces.

“It’s the mayor,” Cynthia said with a grin. “You’re totally useless without your contacts, Nick.”

He glared at the press secretary momentarily, then jogged across Seventh Avenue. “Hey, Alison!”

Hart followed and Cynthia hobbled after them. “Hey, no aid for the cripple here?”

Mayor Alison Stein slammed the car door and turned at the sound of the Secretary of State’s familiar drawl. They shook hands warmly. Draper noticed her hair was up in its usual braided bun—did she ever let it down?—but she’d lost some weight, and the gauntness around her eyes made her appear a little older and much more weary than the last time they’d met. But the smile lighting

her face was genuine.

“Our government leaders are out exercising awfully early, aren’t they?” she said.

Cynthia smiled sardonically. “It’s the only time that slave driver of a President lets us out of his sight.”

“How’re things going here?” asked Draper. “Looks like your city’s as popular as ever.”

Alison raised her eyebrows in an ironic arch. “I guess they all figure if the Big Apple’s good enough for the President, it’s good enough for them.”

“It may be early to be jogging,” Stuart Hart intoned, “but doesn’t that make it doubly early for you to be out working?” Alison Stein snorted. “Damn right. But we’re starting something new today. You know that we’ve got our own little Ellis Island set up inside the Garden, right? We’ve got cots and doctors and counselors and social workers. People can stay here for a few days until they get their bearings.”

“But how can they get in touch with people they know?” asked Cynthia. “When I was out at one of the camps last week, more than a few people complained about that. There’s so much confusion.”

“Ahh, *that’s* why I’m up so early. The phone company’s setting up a whole bank of phones for outgoing calls, and we’re installing a computerized directory-assistance station—and the whole thing’ll be free.”

The other officials nodded their approval. “That should help a lot,” said Cynthia.

A dirty Ford Tempo with government-seal decals on its doors swung over and stopped alongside the mayor’s limo. The driver leaned across the front seat, a mobile-phone receiver in his hand.

“Mr. Secretary,” he called.

Draper and Hart turned simultaneously. “Yes?” they chorused.

“They always do that,” said Cynthia. “If vaudeville ever comes back . .

Draper eyed his taller colleague. “I thought you were going to answer to ‘Mr. *Acting Secretary.*’ ”

“I would, but I can’t train these Secret Service fellows to say all that.”

The agent behind the wheel punctuated the exchange with a sharp *blaaaat* on the horn.

“I think he wants us,” said Cynthia.

“/ don’t,” the agent said, sounding annoyed. “The *President* does—right away. Get in. I’ll drive you back.”

Mayor Stein waved to them as they clambered inside the government car.

“I get the front so I can stretch out my terminally damaged leg,” Cynthia cried, hopping in with sudden vigor.

She had her door closed and locked before Draper and Hart had even moved. They traded suspicious glances.

“I don’t think she’s hurt at all,” said Draper as he slid into the rear compartment.

“Indeed,” Hart agreed. “We’ve been had.” He closed his door and the car accelerated away from the sidewalk. “Do you attribute this mendacious behavior to the fact that she’s a female of the species or to the fact that she used to be a reporter?”

Draper thought it over for a moment. “Both.”

Up front, Cynthia Sobel pretended to be pecking away at a word processor. “Chikka-chikka-chikka-chikka, ‘Secretaries of State and Defense Libel All Women and Reporters,’ ” she said smugly. “Ah, yes, I can see the headlines now!”

The Secret Service driver simply smirked, made a U-turn, and headed across town.

* * *

The broad-shouldered tower of the Grand Hyatt stood glistening in the late August sun. Its golden-glass eastern face reflected a shimmering image of the Art Deco Chrysler Building across Lexington Avenue. One of Manhattan's newest luxury hotels, the Hyatt had been constructed on the shell of the old Commodore. That grande dame, dating back to the early years of the century, had been gutted to make way for the new. Even in death, her steel skeleton had been sturdy enough to stand as the heart of the sleek new structure.

Draper had stayed in the Commodore once, many years ago, and if the new Hyatt didn't have the old girl's personality . . . well, it sure as hell was luxurious.

The Secret Service car deposited Draper, Sobel, and Hart at the main entrance, where a doorman in brown uniform with tails ushered them in. As they circled through the revolving door, it took a moment for Draper's eyes to adjust to the subdued lighting in the multitiered lobby. Smoked glass allowed filtered sunshine to seep in, illuminating the marble staircases, golden banisters and chandeliers, and opulent brown-and-gray furnishings.

Blinking as he led Hart and Sobel up the steps from the foyer, Draper barely avoided running head-on into Leonard Katowski flying down to meet them. The President's chief of staff was dressed in his regular uniform of business suit—too short at the sleeve and cuff—white shirt, and narrow striped tie. Katowski's thatch of hair looked as if it hadn't had even passing acquaintance with a brush in several days.

"Where the hell have you three been?" he snapped, arms flapping with nervous energy. Somehow one of his ever-present manila folders clutched under his armpit stayed in place.

Draper took hold of Katowski's elbow. "Just out joggin', Len. No need to go off track."

"That's easy for you to say. *You're* not the one who gets first word of horrible things that have to be told to the President, who is *still* asleep."

"Well, we're all back now," Draper said, glancing at Hart and Sobel. He gave them a knowing half smile as they rolled their eyes behind Katowski's back. The chief of staff was an efficient, intelligent man. Morrow relied on him heavily, and he'd never let his boss down. He was loyal yet honest. *But, Lordy, the man can get more nervous than a turkey the day before Thanksgiving*, Draper

thought.

They reached the elevators and Katowski raced with wild strides directly toward the express car waiting for them. The attendant stepped aside so they could enter, then shut the doors and started the elevator to the top floor. Katowski's right foot tapped out an irregular drumbeat as his eyes focused on the floor-indicator lights above their heads. It was almost as if he were willing the device to move faster.

"Leonard," Cynthia Sobel said sweetly, "if you don't make that foot hold still, / will—with a hammer and nails."

The tap dance ceased. Katowski pinched his mouth into a sour grimace. "Terribly sorry."

"Aw, she didn't mean anythin' by it," Draper said soothingly.

"The hell she didn't," said Katowski.

After a silent moment, Cynthia nodded. "He's right, Nick. I did."

Katowski whirled to face his colleagues. "You people are always picking on me for being nervous and jumpy. Well, I have feelings, too."

"Pardon me for perhaps making things worse," said Stuart Hart, "but you *are* nervous and jumpy, Leonard."

"You would be too if you had my job," said the chief of staff, his narrow shoulders hunched defensively.

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. "Presidential suite," said the operator. "Should I wait?"

"No, no, that's okay," said Draper. "Thanks."

Katowski lurched past them and marched headlong down the corridor, footfalls silenced by the thick carpeting.

"Now hold on a sec," Draper said, grabbing the taller man by one flailing wrist.

"What? What is it?" Katowski demanded. "We're in a hurry, Nick!"

“Now just calm down. Tell us what’s so important so suddenly.”

The chief of staff planted hands on hips. “Oh, what is this, the old Len-doesn’t-know-when-it’s-okay-to-wake-the-Presi-dent routine? Well, I’m with him more than all of you combined. I *know* when to wake him up. It’s the oil convoy in the North Atlantic. The Visitors attacked this morning.”

The other three exchanged startled glances. In unison Draper and Hart clamped grips on Katowski’s bony elbows and yanked him toward the President’s suite.

“Let’s get a move on,” Draper said. “You’re right, that is important!”

The chief of staff tried to spread his arms in protest, but they were pinned to his ribs. He uttered a strangled cry of frustration. “Ooohl That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you since the lobby!”

Two solid-looking Secret Service agents stood guard at the door of the suite. One nodded at the four officials while the other opened the door.

Barbara Morrow was waiting for them in the entry hall. The President’s wife was a tall, patrician woman, and even at this early hour she looked tastefully stylish. In fact, thought Draper, she fit splendidly with the elegant rose-beige decor of the suite. He noticed that the carpet was so sumptuous, their running shoes left tread marks as they followed her into the living room. A silver tray with coffee, tea, juice, and Danishes was set for them and she invited them to sit and help themselves.

“Bill is getting dressed and dousing himself with cold water. I got him up as soon as Len called to say you’d be up soon.” “Thanks, Barbara,” said Nick Draper. “Makes this sort of thing a whole lot easier when you pave the path for us.” She made a self-deprecating gesture. “Oh, you people worry too much about him. He’s strong as a horse. The doctors said there was nothing wrong with his heart after those chest pains. He denies it to this day, but I’d swear it was the omelet with the jalapeno peppers he gobbled that morning.”

“Well, it’s also the time he was prisoner,” Katowski began. “Nobody really knows what he went through when Diana had him in her torture chamber for months. We’re just afraid—” Barbara Morrow cut him off. “I see him every day—almost as much as you, Len,” she quipped, “and I know he’s got no scars from that ordeal. If anything, I think he’s stronger for having survived it. I really don’t

think you should concern yourselves so much with his delicate condition.”

“Begging the First Lady’s pardon,” Stu Hart said dryly, “but it’s not the President’s delicate condition that worries us— it’s his wrath when we get him upset.”

Mrs. Morrow broke into a smile. “Bill’s just a big white-haired pussycat.”

A sound came from the living room doorway, and they turned to see the imposing figure of William Brent Morrow, President of the United States. His aides stood to greet him. He motioned them back onto the couch.

His wife shrugged. “See? I told you.”

“Where’s my saucer of milk?” Morrow asked as he came in and kissed Barbara on the cheek.

“I’ll get it, Mr. President,” she said, leaving for the kitchen. Morrow stretched to his full height, well over six feet, then sat back in an overstuffed recliner. “Okay, what’s this morning’s crisis, Nick?”

“I defer to Leonard, Mr. President. He’s got the goods.” Katowski cleared his throat timidly. “Well, uh, sir, it’s the um—”

“With all that nervous energy, I wish you’d apply a bit of it to speeding up this little presentation, Leonard.”

“Yes, sir. It’s the convoy in the North Atlantic. They’ve been attacked by Visitors.”

Morrow leaned forward. “Details?”

“Essentially, all we know is that they came under attack by maybe fifteen skyfighters. But all the alert strategies seem to have worked. The task force had planes up before the Visitors could get close. It was no surprise attack, and I believe our boys got off the first shots.”

“Yeah? And?”

Katowski swallowed, his prominent Adam’s apple bobbing up and down. “And

what, sir?”

“And what’s happened? Who won?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know yet, sir. My office has instructions to let us know the second something else comes in.” Morrow sat back again, fingers steepled thoughtfully. “And if we don’t hear anything soon, we can assume the Visitors blasted the tankers, the *Nimitz*, and everything else to kingdom come.”

Mrs. Morrow came back with a tall glass of milk, but the President was already on his feet. “Len, get Olav Lindstrom on the horn. Tell him what happened. I want a meeting with his people over at the United Nations. Tell him twenty minutes. I want you all there. Meet me downstairs at the limo in fifteen minutes.”

Draper indicated their running outfits. “Mr. President, we’re all sweaty—”

“You’re too kind, Nick. You all stink, but showers’ll have to wait. Fifteen minutes.” He grabbed the glass of milk in one huge hand and swept out of the room.

Cynthia fingered her perspiration-soaked T-shirt. “Yuck.”

With a haughty glance, Leonard Katowski stepped imperiously past his three co-workers. “Runners—*hah*.” He nodded a farewell to Barbara Morrow and headed for the door.

Cynthia chewed on her lip for a moment. “I want to kill him myself, but I’m willing to draw straws for the privilege.”

Chapter 3

Eyes closed, Peter Forsythe rolled his head back and reveled in the pulsing beat of the shower's steamy jets. The water kneaded his neck and shoulders like tiny, uncountable masseuses. Then he felt genuine human fingers dancing lightly down his sides and clasping his waist and he opened his eyes to find Lauren Stewart's lips an inch from his own. Her chin rested on his shoulder, and he turned to kiss her. Her lustrous black hair clung to the outline of her face, around finely sculpted cheekbones, framing exquisite almond-shaped eyes. Pete turned around to envelop her in a gentle embrace. He still got a kick out of the way his pale blond coloring contrasted with her caramel-brown skin and marveled at the genetic luck that made Lauren such a scenic combination of her father, a handsome black man, and her late mother, a petite Polynesian beauty.

Playfully, he licked droplets of water off the tip of her nose. "You know," he said, "if locker room showers were like this one, I might've stayed in baseball a coupla years longer."

She smiled archly. "Co-ed showers, Peter?"

"No—I mean the shower head. This massage spray is fantastic!"

"Oh, you lousy . . . She poked him in the gut, and he doubled over, laughing as she wrestled with him.

"Oh, no . . . no, Lauren. Please don't tickle me.. .

Pete scrambled to fend off her wriggling fingers as they probed for proven weak spots. "You know there's only one way I can fight you," he gasped.

"I dare you. You can't do it 'cause you're laughing too hard."

With visible effort, strain showing on his face, he stifled his giggling and aimed at her neck, planting a soft, wet kiss. She struggled to continue her assault, but his counteroffensive was already beginning to have an effect. His kisses marched down from one earlobe, across her throat, then trailed down her chest.

“Not fair,” she whimpered. The tickling ceased.

“Stop me if I’m hurting you.”

“Oh, without a doubt, Dr. Forsythe.”

“Do you hear bells?” he asked between kisses.

“You’re a conceited son of a bitch.”

He stood up straight and wiped a trickle of water off his cheek. “No, I’m not. Your phone’s ringing.”

“Damn,” Lauren said, snapping back to reality. She swept the shower curtain aside, threw a giant terry bath sheet around her midsection, and trotted out into the bedroom to grab the phone before it gave up.

“Hello?”

“I hope I didn’t wake you, Lauren.” It was the lilting Swedish accent of Olav Lindstrom, Secretary General of the United Nations. Her boss.

Lauren sighed, looking wistfully back toward the bathroom. “No, no, Olav—I’m wide awake. What’s wrong?”

“President Morrow called. Something urgent. He wanted to meet with us right away.”

“How soon?”

“How fast can you get over here?”

Lauren hugged herself with the towel. “Well, I’ve already showered. Fifteen minutes okay?”

“Perfect. I’ll have coffee and pastries sent up so you needn’t worry about breakfast.”

“Okay, Olav. See you in fifteen minutes. ’Bye.”

She replaced the receiver. “Hey, Peter, playtime’s over. Urgent UN meeting with

Morrow.” She heard the water stop. “What’s it about?”

“I don’t know, but it’s obviously important.”

Pete came out of the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his waist as he rubbed his sandy, thinning curls with a smaller towel. “I’ll drive you over.”

He draped the small towel over his head and pulled the larger one off to dry his arms and chest. Lauren smiled as she watched him disappear into the bathroom again. Even though his baseball career with the New York Yankees had been cut short by knee injuries, he still had the taut body of an athlete. If anything, he was in better shape now, following his retirement from the sport after the first Visitor invasion. He’d thrown himself full-time into finishing medical school, but reserved an hour a day for exercise. The love handles that had been growing around his hips when Lauren had first undressed him were gone now. And he still had the cutest tush she’d ever seen on a grown man.

As she chose a blazer and comfortable slacks from her closet and got dressed, she pondered her unlikely relationship with Peter Forsythe.

Hard to believe we couldn’t stand the sight of each other not so long ago, she thought. He’d been a student of her father’s at Cornell Medical Center, studying part-time while finishing up a baseball career that had made him famous and wealthy. He’d also had well-publicized bouts with various bottles. After the Visitors’ initially peaceful arrival on Earth, she’d been with her father at a party given by the mayor of New York, and Pete and other representatives of the Yankees had been there, too. When her dad had chided her for being cool to Pete, she’d summed up her disdain for him with a succinct characterization: “I’m always chilly to cynical drunks who make a million dollars a year and have no reason to be cynical drunks.”

That particular phrase still stuck in her mind because she’d been so wrong about Pete. Through the long waking nightmare of the Visitors’ occupation, when her father had been kidnapped along with so many other people and had stayed missing for months, Pete’s concern for his teacher and friend had convinced Lauren to take a second look at the man who was much more than a cynical drunk, as it turned out. Circumstances had pushed them into the same band of resistance fighters here in New York. They’d become its leaders, and they’d fought the growing attraction between them. Finally, when the aliens had been

driven from the planet and Lauren's father had been returned, Pete had been the one to make the first move. *That idiot—landing on the roof of the UN with a damned Visitor skyfighter and whisking me off to Hawaii!* That's where her mother had been born, where her parents had met. And it was where she and Pete had first made love. *Right out on the beach, just like all those silly romance novels and movies*, she recalled. The proper, practical part of Lauren—still more than half, she mused—was firmly convinced that such romantic goings-on *were* silly. She supposed it was a measure of how far she'd come, with Pete's patient help, that she did do those silly things now and then.

Lauren put the finishing touches on her eyeliner—she wore very little makeup—and turned to see Pete stepping out of the bathroom and buttoning his blue oxford shirt. He grabbed the summer-weight sports coat tossed casually on the corner chair the night before and slung it over one shoulder.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Yes. Let's go."

Presidential flags flapping at the corners of its gleaming black fenders, the armored Lincoln bounded up out of the Hyatt's underground garage and swung onto Forty-second Street. With six police motorcycles arrayed around it, the limousine drove east, covering the three blocks to the United Nations complex in a few minutes.

In the old days, Morrow thought, *I'd have been greeted by a line of dignitaries from here to next Tuesday, plus a brass band*. But pomp and ceremony were nonessentials in this new era defined by global war. The limo and police escort pulled up in front of the main UN entrance, to be greeted by no one at all. Though he had occasional twinges of nostalgia for the formal flourishes of protocol, deep down in his Texas soul "Wild Bill" Morrow preferred the current simplicity. *Hell, I know my way to Lindstrom's office*. Jimmy Carter may not have been an all-time great President, but Morrow had admired the man for having the gumption to carry his own suitcase and coat bag when he got off Air Force One.

Morrow reached for the door handle and clambered out first, followed by Draper, Katowski, Hart, and Sobel. The trio of joggers had donned blue warm-up suits. National Security Adviser Gerald Livingston had an apartment a block

away, so he'd be arriving on his own, probably late. As he strode into the lobby of the Secretariat building, Morrow hoped that the White House aides who worked in the presidential office here at the UN, and who had called Chief of Staff Katowski with the initial news, would have some conclusive reports for them by the time they convened the meeting.

"Mr. President," a voice called from behind Morrow's entourage. It was Pete Forsythe with Lauren Stewart, both hustling to catch up. Katowski had already moved ahead to summon an elevator, so Morrow stopped to greet the new arrivals, exchanging hearty handshakes with both Pete and Lauren.

"I hope it's okay if Pete comes along, sir," said Lauren, all business now.

Morrow shrugged. "Resistance heroes have security clearance as far as I'm concerned. Glad to have you join the party, Pete." He glanced at his watch. "Isn't it a tad early for you to be up and around, though, just to drive the lady over here? Nice boy, Pete."

"Well, actually we had a late date, Mr. President," Pete said sotto voce.

Lauren flashed a chilly glare at Pete and jabbed him in the ribs while the President stifled a knowing grin.

"Let's go," Katowski said, holding the elevator.

Lindstrom looked up when he heard the conference room door open.

"Olav!" Lauren scolded.

He spread his hands helplessly. The white-haired Secretary General of the United Nations had his suit coat draped over the back of his chair. He wore a white apron and had been caught in the act of carefully arranging croissants, Danishes, and a variety of other morning pastries on four trays around the long oval table. Coffee was already brewing in the machine and Styrofoam cups and plates were set neatly at each place.

"I promised food would be ready," Lindstrom said simply. There was no one else to do this."

"Well, it's not very dignified," Lauren said in a huff. Lindstrom's eyes sparkled.

“I thought I looked rather fetching in this apron, but I can take it off if you’d prefer, Lauren.”

She shook her head and smiled.

Leonard Katowski cleared his throat rather obviously.

“Ah, yes, I believe that is our signal,” Lindstrom said, removing the apron and slipping into his jacket. He took his seat and the others followed his lead, reaching for the breakfast cakes as they reached for their chairs.

Morrow leaned on the table. “I’d like to thank you all for coming here,” he said as two UN staff aides and the perfectly tailored Livingston hurried in and sat down. “We got a report early this morning that the convoy transporting North Sea oil from Britain to here was attacked at dawn in the North Atlantic.”

The UN people and Pete made audible gasps at the news. “Are the ships safe?” Lindstrom asked first.

“Well, Olav, that’s something we just don’t know yet. Our last report didn’t tell us a whole hell of a lot. Just that they were under attack by about fifteen skyfighters and they’d taken measures to preempt the attack before the Visitors could take the offensive.”

They were interrupted by a knock at the open door. A young blond woman stepped in and paused. Katowski shoved his chair back in a quick motion, almost tipping it over. He waved her in, his eyes homing in on the folder in her hands. “Jessi, what have you got?”

She handed him the folder, then seemed to hold her breath while he opened it. He scanned the top sheet and the tension around his eyes visibly slackened. Then he, too, seemed to hold his breath as he passed the folder to Morrow.

The President snatched it impatiently, furrows creasing his brow. A moment later his serious face split into a smile and he ruffled one hand through his thick mane of white hair.

“Good news, everybody. The task force repulsed the attack. The Visitors never even got a clear shot at the tankers. The F-Fourteens and -Fifteens went at ’em, and then the guided-missile gunboats took their best shots. We shot down or

severely damaged nine of the fifteen alien ships before they turned tail.”

“Did we suffer any losses?” Stuart Hart asked, concern etching his expression.

Morrow took a deep breath. “Yeah, Stu, I’m afraid we did. We lost seven planes, and those bastards sank one of the frigates. ” He paused to place the folder gently on the table and rub his eyes. When he spoke again, Morrow’s voice was barely above a whisper. “Thirty-five known dead, seventy-eight wounded on several of the ships, and a hundred crewmen from the frigate are listed as missing. Dammit.”

There was silence in the room.

“I am sorry, Mr. President. I’ve had UN troops killed that I sent to trouble spots. It is a terrible responsibility sending troops into battle,” Lindstrom finally said.

Morrow nodded absently. “Yeah, and I keep feeling like I should somehow be out there with ’em.”

“You have been,” Lindstrom said. “You and I have both been soldiers sent by other leaders to face death. We don’t do this lightly, but it is something we have to do. If I were a soldier today, I would feel better knowing my Commander in Chief had already been where he was sending me.”

“I guess you’re right, Olav. My *brain* tells me you’re right, but my gut tells me there’s gotta be another way.”

“There isn’t, sir,” Pete Forsythe said, “and you know it.” “Is there anything I can do to help?” Lindstrom asked. Morrow thought for a moment, his bushy silver brows settling into a deep and angry frown. “Yeah, there is. You still have that communications link to Diana, don’t you?”

The UN official nodded. “Yes, but we haven’t had much reason to use it. Lauren is the one who handles it.”

Lauren leaned forward. “It still works, Mr. President.” “Good,” Morrow growled. “Not that it’s gonna do a hell of a lot of good, but I want to at least give her an earful.”

* * *

“What an . . . interesting surprise,” said Diana, offering a chilly smile. “You’re looking well, President Morrow.” Morrow didn’t bother to return the smile. His manner was brusque. “Thank you for agreeing to accept this communication. But it’s not a social call,”

“I wasn’t even aware you had this equipment.”

Lauren recalled that the large video screen and terminal had been installed in those first heady days after the Visitors descended on the planet, enabling Diana and John, the supreme commander who later died at Diana’s hands, to keep in constant touch with the UN. Lauren also remembered the first time she’d had occasion to use it—the day her father had disappeared and the Visitors claimed his arrest as a part of the scientists’ conspiracy had been a bureaucratic error. The advanced communication station had been left behind with all the other equipment the Visitors couldn’t retrieve when they’d fled before the killing clouds of red dust.

The President impatiently waved off Diana’s attempt at small talk as he glared at her image on the screen. “This is an official diplomatic protest. Lord knows we’ve fought our share of savage wars on this planet, but even the war with the Nazis had rules of engagement both sides generally abided by. One of the rules was, no interference with civilian shipping.”

Diana laughed derisively. “President Morrow, if you’re referring to that convoy escorting your oil tankers in the North Atlantic—”

“That’s exactly what I’m referring to, Diana.”

She cut him off, the smile gone from her face and replaced with a sneer of ruthless authority. “Oil tankers may be civilian ships, Mr. President, but *oil* is a weapon of war for you humans. And any ship, truck, or pipeline that carries that oil is a fair target. If you surrender, I’d be willing to guarantee you a supply to keep your people warm during your winter season. We Visitors prefer warmth ourselves, as you know. But as long as you insist on continuing this foolish attempt at throwing us off this planet, we’ll do whatever is necessary to cut your supply lines. We *will* defeat you sooner or later. You know that. Meanwhile, I’ll leave you with one thought, President Morrow—it’s going to be winter soon. Consider how comfortable your people will be above the frostline, protected by the red dust, but freezing to death in the profound darkness of homes without

power.”

At her end Diana reached for a control panel and her image on the UN screen blanked out .

“Shit,” Morrow said under his breath. He glanced at his aides and the UN people gathered at one side of the room. “Not much of an earful, was it?”

“You did what you could, sir,” said Len Katowski. “Which wasn’t a goddamned thing.”

The emergency session reconvened in Olav Lindstrom’s conference room, only now the topic was how to insure future supplies of oil. “Top priority,” Morrow said as he poured himself a fresh cup of coffee and carefully burrowed through the pastry pile, extracting a cheese Danish and taking a large bite. “Like it or not, oil’s still black gold to us. It’s the lifeblood of the industrial north, and we have to keep those industries going if we ever hope to get rid of the Visitors.” Morrow’s eyes circled the table, silently and rapidly measuring the assembled advisers. They ranged from the former inner circle of his White House staff to the officials of the United Nations, to the casual Peter Forsythe, representing the invaluable resistance.

The President’s gaze came to rest on Gerald Livingston. The dapper national security adviser was a collector by nature, of fine five-hundred-dollar suits in his closet and facts in his mind. But it wasn’t merely an accumulation of knowledge that made Livingston so valuable to him—it was the man’s ability to analyze and arrange, using facts to illuminate problems and spotlight possible solutions.

“Gerry, what’s the current status of world supplies?” Livingston leaned back in his chair, voice cool and precise. “Well, sir, let’s start with home. The Alaskan fields are, of course, in our hands. Output near maximum, distribution difficult but proceeding with no major disruptions. But most of the remainder of our oil comes from wells in the Southwest and off the Gulf Coast. Sixty percent of that capacity has been lost to us because of territory being controlled outright by the aliens. Another thirty-five percent is disputed territory, also out of production. Just five percent is still producing, but distribution is spotty at best for obvious reasons—Visitor interference with truck and rail traffic and damage to pipelines.”

“Has that damage been intentional?” Morrow asked.

“For the most part, no, sir. A lot of it’s happened in the course of fighting. From all the intelligence we’ve been able to gather, the Visitors haven’t devoted much effort to actively cutting those pipelines.”

The President nibbled thoughtfully at the Danish. “Hm, go on.”

“Yes, sir—foreign supplies. North Sea fields are in good shape. But again, they’ve got similar problems in transporting their oil. The Soviet fields are secure—not too many Visitors heading up to Siberia.”

“Have the Soviets been giving any of their oil to anybody else?” asked Pete.

Livingston snorted like a teacher condescending to a slow pupil. “Giving? More like selling—and then at their whim. Not a reliable source for anyone but themselves, I’m afraid. The Middle East is a real trouble spot, Mr. President. The red dust is next to useless there, and the Visitors have overrun most of the region. The Israelis are holding on to their little spit of land, and they and the Egyptians and Saudis have set their differences aside for the time being and have put together a combined force to protect the Saudi oil fields. So far they’ve been successful, but they’re surrounded by alien forces and it’s impossible to ship so much as a barrel out of there. That’s pretty much it—not a very encouraging picture.”

Secretary of Defense Hart drew his lips into a tight line. “We don’t know the facts of this morning’s raid yet, but I fear that Diana means what she said. If they step up their raids on our convoys, we won’t be able to rely on *any* foreign oil. I suggest we focus our energies, no pun intended, on securing greater amounts of oil closer to home.”

Draper took a pipe out of his briefcase, packed it with rich, cherry-scented tobacco, and lit it. He puffed twice, sending a fragrant plume drifting across the conference table. “Seems to me you’re not offerin’ much of a choice, Stu. If we don’t have the defense to protect overseas shipping, where the Visitors are *also* strung out, then we won’t have the defense to secure local supply lines either. Not with our land transport at the mercy of strong concentrations of alien firepower.”

Stuart Hart shrugged. “I never said we wouldn’t be between Scylla and Charybdis.” He arched his eyebrows as he glanced around the table, encountering more than one quizzical expression. “That’s between a rock and a

hard place, for the less literary among us.”

The President narrowed his eyes. “I’m inclined to agree with Stu, Nick. Nobody ever said it’d be easy, but the closer to home our forces are, the better I think our chances are. Plus, working within our own country, we’ve got a few tricks to fall back on. Out on the high seas, those convoys are easy pickin’s.”

Pete Forsythe tentatively raised a finger. “I’m no expert, but it wouldn’t seem like we’d be able to resume oil production at wells right under Diana’s nose.”

“Good point, Peter,” Morrow said. “But I’m not talking about pumping new oil. I’m talking oil that’s already pumped. ”

Livingston nodded in anticipatory agreement. “The Strategic Reserve. ...”

“Right,” said Morrow.

Olav Lindstrom looked from one to the other. “I’m not familiar with that.”

“Not many people are,” the President said. “After the Arab oil embargo in ’seventy-three and -four, President Ford started this program. The idea was to build up a rainy-day supply in case our oil was ever cut off again.”

“I remember reading something about that,” said Lauren. “Wasn’t the plan to store up a six-month supply?”

Morrow nodded. “We’ve got about four months’ worth now.”

“Where?” asked Pete.

“Ahh, that’s the problem,” the President answered. “It’s stored in underground salt domes along the coasts of Texas and Louisiana.”

“Visitor territory,” Pete concluded glumly.

“That may be true,” Livingston said, “but as far as we can tell, they don’t know it’s there. These salt caverns are in very marginal areas—swampland and bayous. Not exactly prime real estate as far as the Visitors are concerned. No heavy industry, no major population centers, just oil wells that we abandoned when they invaded.”

Morrow stood, towering over the table. “What we’ve gotta do, ladies and gentlemen, is think of ways to sneak that oil out from under those lizard rear ends and get it into tanks in the North where we’ll have a fighting chance to protect it. Olav, your people don’t really have to worry about this, unless you’ve got some experts who want to kick in their two cents. Ail ideas’re more than welcome. But my people—this is your homework assignment for the day. Consider it the most important work you’ve ever had to do. Get your staffs on it first thing, and I want to see some useful plans by tomorrow morning at eight-thirty. ”

Chapter 4

For Lydia the uneasy alliance shared with Diana had its rewarding moments. Whenever Diana was off the bridge or, better yet, entirely off the Mother Ship, Lydia was in command. At those times the blond officer could almost imagine that her dark rival did not even exist. *My ship, my mission. I'm supreme fleet commander now!* But those moments were all too ephemeral, too easily shattered by the clicking of Diana's boot heels as she'd strut onto the command deck.

Lydia had served under superior officers she didn't like, others she didn't agree with, but none for whom she'd had so little respect as Diana. She'd done some research into her commander's background and knew Diana came from a political family. Her father had been a government minister and had somehow managed to survive coups and purges under several regimes. Diana's mother had been a highly placed scientist and had likely been a role model for her daughter. In more ways than choice of vocation, apparently. Though no one had been able to prove it, Diana's mother was suspected of being a very successful assassin, removing her husband's rivals with clever and untraceable methods of murder.

It had surprised Lydia only slightly to learn that Diana's father had himself died under mysterious circumstances, ending a marital union that had been unusually long-lasting in Visitor society. Naturally, rumors had made the rounds in the Leader's court. It could have been Diana's mother who'd killed him, but Tiirac had certainly made enough enemies on his own to dilute suspicions aimed at his mate. In the end it didn't really matter, and the case had never been solved.

But Diana's family history had made it abundantly clear to Lydia that she was dealing with an unusual breed when it came to her commander. It was a matter of pride to Lydia that her own background was a military one. Her parents' coupling had been purely for reproductive purposes, and she'd enrolled in the fleet academy at the earliest possible age. She'd risen to her prominent rank not by scheming like Diana, but by hard work, intelligence, and devotion to the cause of the homeworld.

Serving under Diana and other officers like her had taught Lydia some unwanted lessons, the most important of which was that honor was of low priority in the

upper echelons of the Great Leader's new army. Simply in order to protect herself and live through the swirl of intrigue surrounding this ill-starred expedition to Earth, she'd had to adapt. She held one central conviction like a sturdy shield—one day one of Diana's schemes would backfire and she would be destroyed. *I'll be ready*, Lydia thought. . . .

"Are you ready?"

Diana's sharp voice intruded on the daydream. Lydia turned to face the commander, squaring her shoulders, her stance challenging Diana's authority. "Yes. All ships report ready for Project Icewind."

A cold smile crossed Diana's lips. "Good." She sat in the command seat at the center of the bridge and surveyed the crew at their stations around her. "Tie in to Icewind commanders," she ordered.

Lydia's fingers tapped out a sequence on the communications panel and the main viewscreen split into six parts. In each portion a face appeared, six officers awaiting Diana's word. Under each, Visitor characters indicated the commander's name and the location of his or her ship—Sergei, Soviet Union, a heavy black mustache drooping around his mouth; Ingmar, Sweden, with blond hair and pale features; Rathma, the swarthy female over India; Shogira, over Japan, his unmasked reptilian face smiling faintly; Haji, also without a human mask, above Iran; and Margaret, over Canada, a frown creasing her oval face. Diana thought briefly of the effort Supreme Commander John had put into creating human appearances and names to match the ethnic characteristics of the countries where the Mother Ships were to be stationed when they'd first arrived at the planet. All that, despite her urging that the invasion be swift and overwhelming, without wasting time on grand strategies of deception.

But John and the others had overruled her. They'd done it their way, and failed miserably. That realization had given her a little extra pleasure when she'd killed John. *No wonder we failed*, she thought now. *We had idiots in charge.*

"Project icewind," she began, addressing the six attentive faces on her screen, "is the single most important offensive measure of our renewed campaign to conquer Earth. You've each been chosen to take part because you've proven yourselves as able commanders with good crews. The devices installed aboard your ships are top secret—no other vessels in the fleet know about Project

Icewind. And they *won't* know about it unless it's successful. If Icewind fails and I can prove that crew error is the cause, you and your responsible crew members will be executed at my command. Is that clear?"

Diana paused while the six officers saluted in response. "But I'm sure none of you will have to face those dire consequences. At the end of this communication, you will leave your current orbit posts and take up assigned positions locked into your Icewind control terminals. I will be constantly monitoring all of you. Bungling will be detected immediately—and noted. So don't try to cover up any mistakes. Simply correct them. Treachery will be punished rather quickly. Very well. Project Icewind begins . . . *now*."

The six commanders saluted again and quickly turned to their own bridge crews. Satisfaction played into Diana's expression. It still intoxicated her to watch inferiors jump to carry out her orders. She touched a toggle switch on her console, and the images on the screen changed from interior views of bridges to exterior shots of the six Mother Ships turning and lumbering away from their usual patrol positions. Their destinations were preordained, programmed into their Icewind software, making the giant starships puppets dancing to Diana's whim.

"Tactical," Diana barked.

Lydia waited insolently for a moment, then punched up a flat global map of Earth, a green grid overlaying it like a monstrous planetary fence. Six spots of light moved across the map. They represented the Mother Ships as they changed location, and each spot was a different color.

They were all moving toward a solid red line shaped into an S-curve that snaked over the northernmost stretch of the earth's surface—over Scandinavia, Siberia, the Arctic Circle, Canada. As Diana watched, her eyes intent, the Visitor vessels converged with the curved graph line. One by one the indicator spots slid into place, each setting off a tinted flare like a tiny supernova on the map grid. Once in position, each spot continued flashing at a lower level of brilliance.

Finally all six were on the S-line, and they pulsed in unison. Diana leaned forward. "Engage Icewind generators."

On the tactical screen the indicator spots brightened one at a time and held that intensity. When all six had done so, Lydia turned to the commander. "All

generators engaged, Diana. All telemetry monitors operating, all systems read nominal.” “Very good, Lydia.”

“Exactly what effect will Project Icewind have?”

Diana half smiled. “The humans have an adage about curiosity, my dear. They say it killed the cat.”

The blond officer stiffened. “This has nothing to do with curiosity. You’ve kept me in the dark through the entire planning of this project, in spite of the fact that my security staff should know everything going on in this fleet.” Diana’s eyes sparked with anger. “Don’t forget who the superior officer is, Commander. You and your security staff know only what I *want* you to know.”

“Need I remind you that I’m also second in command? If anything happens to you, I’ll need to know all classified data, including your precious Project Icewind.”

Diana abruptly stood. “Report to my quarters in ten minutes and you’ll be briefed.” Tossing her mane of dark hair over her shoulder, she turned and left the bridge.

* * *

“Sit down,” said Diana as Lydia came into her cabin. Diana slipped a small cassette into her desk-top computer and the screen played back a full-color simulation of what seemed to be cloud patterns above the continent of North America. The brown-and-green land mass was clear at first. As they watched, roiling white clouds began to form in the Arctic region and massed in angry swirls, marching down and across the continent. After a few seconds, they covered all of North America. But instead of continuing out to sea past the East Coast, the clouds kept churning over land. Smaller storm patterns formed on the coast and drew moisture in from the Atlantic, injecting it into the growing main disturbance. Then the tape ended.

Lydia sat on the edge of the desk, her arms crossed. “And what was all that?”

“That, darling, is what Project Icewind will do. Right now the generators on those six starships are producing magnetic fields that are already altering the upper atmospheric wind currents of Earth. Specifically over North America.”

“For what purpose?”

“It will take a few days, but very soon the weather pattern over this continent will change rather abruptly from late summer to midwinter.”

Lydia’s large eyes narrowed. “Just what is this supposed to accomplish, even presuming what you say is possible?” “Oh, it’s possible. You can be assured of that. What will it accomplish? It’s part of a much larger plan. ...”

“What plan?”

“My, but you’re full of questions, Lydia. That’s all I think you need to know at this point.”

“You seem to be overlooking something,” Lydia hissed. “Cold weather is what makes the red dust effective against us. Are you sure this Project Icewind of yours won’t get out of control and cool off areas of the planet that haven’t ever had winter before? If that happens, you’ll be giving the red dust the chance to spread.”

“I’m the scientist,” Diana flared. “You’re delving into things you know nothing about. Leave advanced concepts to me. As a matter of fact, Icewind is merely the first stage in a strategy that will bring *more* of the planet under my control, not less. Computer modeling gives us every reason to believe that after we freeze the humans with early winter and make them use up more of their precious oil and gas reserves just to avoid mass death and starvation, we’ll be able to heat up the planet’s overall climate. In case you haven’t grasped the significance of that, it will render the red dust harmless in more areas.”

Lydia shook her head in astonishment. “If you change the climatic balance of Earth, you’re courting total disaster. You could cause floods on the coasts. You could turn croplands and forests into deserts. You could destroy vast numbers of animals and humans—*our food supply*—and dry up the planet’s water—the same kind of changes that turned the homeworld into a wasteland.”

Diana steepled her fingers. “Poor, poor Lydia. You have such a limited vision of the universe. Creatures like you can’t see beyond their fears, can’t imagine the great ideas that change worlds and make us strong enough to conquer *any* world we set our sights on.”

“We have our different perspectives all right. I prefer my own,” Lydia answered, standing tall. “And in my view, you’re perverting your precious science and turning it into a dangerous weapon that could blow up in all our faces.”

“Science is simply another tool,” said Diana. “There’s no point to science at all if we can’t use it to bend nature to *our* needs. That’s our destiny. And if you try to get in the way, you’ll be courting your *own* destruction. *That* I can promise you.”

Chapter 5

A summer of rationed water had turned the lush green grass of Yankee Stadium to a prickly brown thatch, and the rich soil of the infield crescent had become hard and dusty. As he sat in a box seat just behind the Yankee dugout, Peter Forsythe knew how much the head groundskeeper, Ray Lally, must be suffering. Ray had always prided himself on the sterling condition of the stadium's playing field. And Ray's crew worked like hell to keep it that way. The old ball park, with its white concrete shell and electric-blue seats, was one of the last holdouts—no artificial turf for Alex Garr. When he'd purchased the team, Garr had sworn before a roomful of Big Apple sportswriters that the smell of fresh green grass would never be replaced by the sterile odor of plastic carpet, not while *he* was alive and in charge.

Garr was dead now, killed in the climactic airport battle on the day the first Visitor invasion was finally beaten back. Garr had died a hero in Pete's arms on that bloody airstrip on Long Island. But the grass remained. Dry and scruffy perhaps, but hanging on. *Kind of like the rest of us*, Pete thought.

He hunched his shoulders and wished he'd worn more than a lined windbreaker. The wind whipping the flags in center field was sharp and biting, and the sun had barely shown itself for the past week.

Pete glanced back at the stands. There were at most a couple . of thousand people scattered through the field-level boxes, far lower than the number at most of the games played during the past makeshift season. And most of the fans here today were evidently less optimistic than Pete had been about the weather—or more attentive. They wore winter coats and hats, and huddled together under blankets, drinking hot coffee and soup from thermos bottles. *Looks more like a football crowd*, Pete mused.

Like too many everyday happenings, major league baseball had been suspended when the aliens reinvaded. But there was still a need for diversions in areas that hadn't fallen under Visitor tyranny. Oh, television and radio were still on the air. Hut with Southern California—and Hollywood—in a real war zone, no new entertainment shows were being produced for I V except for a few programs done in New York and Canada. For the most part, it was an endless sea of reruns.

The same was true of the choice in movie houses. Theater marquees announced Special Encore Showings and scheduled Robert Redford festivals or similar groupings of old movies by particular actors or directors. But no matter what the glitzy label, it still came to the same thing—reruns.

Live theater had fared somewhat better. In fact, both on and off Broadway, New York found itself the beneficiary of a stage renaissance of sorts. With the flood of refugees coursing into New York City, there were even more unemployed actors than normal in the area. Producers recognized that and, sensing the need for entertainment, mounted smaller-scale lower-cost productions of shows both old and new. Ticket prices were cut to the bone, too, enabling even the displaced and unemployed to see a play once in a while. The most indigent were allowed in for free at least once a month by order of Mayor Alison Stein.

Pete had never been much of a theater goer in the old days, but he'd been to a half-dozen shows himself in the last month.

And baseball had forged ahead as best it could. War did not discriminate. Even millionaire ballplayers had been forced to flee from the Sunbelt states overrun by the Visitors. When they'd arrived in northern cities, they'd been welcomed by their colleagues from the local teams, and the players found there was still a demand for the relaxing pace of America's national pastime. Informal pick-up games in local parks had evolved into a sort of semipro league, playing in the big ball parks that otherwise stood dormant. Spectators were allowed in for fifty cents or a dollar. The gate proceeds were divided among those players in the game that day.

In New York there were enough players to form three full teams, and Pete had helped draw up a genuine schedule for his old mates, using a computer at New York Hospital, where he worked now. The city papers even followed these new teams, printing box scores and standings in a comforting semblance of seasons past.

Pete had never doubted that the games would prove popular, but he *had* been surprised with *how* popular. Once the local minileague had been bom, natives and emigres had readily settled into new rooting allegiances, usually based on how many of their former favorites were on each team. By midsummer, a real pennant race had developed, and it wasn't uncommon to have thirty or forty thousand people filling Yankee Stadium or Shea Stadium out in Queens, where

games were alternately played.

But the weather had suddenly gone from the pleasant warmth of early September to a damp chill more like late November.

“It’s goddamned cold,” said a flinty, New England-accented voice behind Pete.

He turned to see Dr. Hannah Donnenfeld, a Boston Red Sox cap pulled over her wispy white hair. She wore the blue-and-white Yankees warm-up jacket Pete had given her after they’d worked to defeat the Visitors last time around. He pointed at the contrasting team insignias. “Having an identity crisis, Hannah?”

She gave him a smug smile. “Not a bit, young Doctor Forsythe. The hat I wear as a token of love—”

“And the jacket out of respect for me?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Not on your life. It just happens to be rather warm.”

They both laughed and Pete stood to greet the others with Hannah—Dr. George Stewart, Lauren’s father and Pete’s close friend and teacher; Sari James, the perky strawberry-blond biologist from Hannah’s Brook Cove Lab complex out on Long Island; and a tall, dark-haired man Pete had never seen before. The man had an arm around Sari’s shoulders, and reached out to shake Pete’s hand, also offering a charming smile.

“Neville More,” he said with a cultivated British accent. He looked about thirty-five, with fine-boned good looks. “Pleased to meet you, Dr. Forsythe.”

Pete tried to match More’s sophisticated charm, but the best he could muster was a boyish grin more country than Continental. “Please, just call me Pete. When somebody calls me Dr. Forsythe, I still look around for a guy in a white coat with a stethoscope.”

“Well then, Pete it is. You’re rather famous for your exploits, both on the baseball diamond and in the last war. It’s a great pleasure to meet a real hero.”

Pete blushed uncomfortably. “I never really thought of myself as a hero—”

“Liar,” Donnenfeld interrupted, lips curled in an impish half smile.

Pausing for a flare of feigned anger, Pete continued, “But if I *was* a hero, lots of other people were, too, including all present company.”

“Neville’s pretty famous, too,” said Sari, her freckled nose made red by the cold wind. There was pride in her tone.

The Englishman ducked his head modestly. “Oh, Sari exaggerates a bit.”

“I do not,” she pouted. “You’re only one of the world’s foremost experts on computers.”

Pete’s eyebrows lifted in interest. “Oh? Wait a minute.” He squinted and mumbled More’s name a few times. “Are you the Neville More who founded that company—what was it?” Sari looked annoyed. “Magicomp,” she said roughly. “Only the company that came up with a better way to beat the Von Neumann bottleneck.”

“The what?”

“The electronic flaw in everyday computers that slows down their data processing,” Sari explained. “Neville and Magicomp designed and built the most successful parallel-process-ing computer yet and revolutionary software to go with it.”

Pete turned sheepish under Sari’s lingering frown. “I remembered, I just didn’t remember the specifics.”

“I’m surprised my name would ring *that* much of a bell, Dr. Forsythe—uh, Pete. I’m flattered.” More flashed his perfect white teeth again.

“I read about you in the business section of the *Times* awhile back. I think Sari’s right to be impressed.”

The young woman stiffened. “I’m not impressed, Pete. You make me sound like a groupie. I just appreciate what Neville’s done in his field. Just like baseball fans appreciate what you did on that field,” she said, nodding toward the diamond where a team in home-white uniforms had come out to hit and throw in pregame warm-ups.

“Well, well, why doesn’t everybody sit down,” Pete said, trying to brush away

the lingering discomfort he felt. “George, have you talked to Lauren lately?”

The tall black man splayed his legs into the aisle. “Yesterday. Why?”

“Oh, just that I haven’t been able to get her at home for the past couple of days.”

Dr. Stewart nodded. “Me neither. She called *me*. She’s been in heavy-duty meetings at the UN—something about oil supplies.” He shivered and turned his coat collar up. “Speaking of which, I sure hope this cold snap doesn’t mean we’re in for a long winter. What with everything being rationed, we’re sure to run out of oil and gas.”

“I can’t remember it ever being this cold this early,” Sari said, sitting very close to Neville More.

“*You* can’t remember?” Hannah said, pretending to be scornful. “Why, child, that ain’t nothin’. My memory goes back a bit farther, and *I* can’t remember it ever being this cold this early. ”

“Ahh, I can see you ladies have never lived in England,” Neville said with a chuckle.

“What was the temperature this morning anyway?” asked Pete.

George Stewart shivered again. “Thirty-five—and I’d bet it’s gone down since then.”

“Well, it could be worse,” Pete said philosophically. “At least *we* can wear gloves or put our hands in our pockets.” He gestured toward the players on the field, several of whom had their bare hands folded under their armpits for warmth. “They can’t.”

“Do you ever miss playing, Pete?” Neville asked.

“Not on days like this. In fact, one team is a couple of guys short, and they asked if I’d suit up. That’s one of the disadvantages of sitting down here where they can see me.” Hannah snorted. “Hah! Don’t tell me you weren’t the least bit tempted.”

“You didn’t see me take batting practice the other day. If you had, you wouldn’t

have asked that question.”

Everyone laughed except Sari, whose attention had drifted, her eyes focusing both near and far at the same time. Neville noticed her distraction first.

“Something wrong, my dear?”

She scratched her neck in perplexity. “Either somebody in the upper deck has dandruff—and I’m talking humongous Hakes—or we’ve got ourselves snow flurries.”

George Stewart set his chin like a determined bulldog. “Hell, I don’t care *how* cold it is. It simply *can’t* snow in September. ”

“I don’t believe it,” Pete said mournfully, staring out the window of his apartment. “How the hell can it snow a foot in Manhattan on September third?”

Hannah Donnenfeld, Sari James, and Neville More were with Pete in his living room, enjoying snacks and drinks. “Looks like you’ve got yourselves three guests for the night, Peter,” Donnenfeld said.

Pete turned away from the window, started to draw the shade down, but decided against cutting off the view of the outside oddity. “I guess so. No problem—got plenty of room and plenty of food.”

“Do you have boots?” More asked.

“What?”

“Boots.”

“For sleeping or for cooking?”

More smiled. “Neither. For walking in the snow.”

“Sure, but are you sure you want to go out there?” “Well, I’ve spent most of my adult life living where it always rains, but never snows, and I for one would love to stroll in the snow. Besides, I hear a nice white blanket makes this city awfully pretty.”

“It does,” said Sari. “May I be your guide?”

“Why, certainly.” More put out his arm, and she linked hers through it. “Maybe we could even take in a show. I hear the Great White Way is pretty well lit these days.”

“Anybody care to join us?” asked Sari.

Pete and Hannah exchanged a look. Neither thought Sari really wanted them to tag along.

After waiting a barely polite moment, she shook her blond ponytail back over one shoulder. “No? Well, you old folks have a nice time watching the tube or whatever it is you feel like doing.” Sari tugged Neville in the direction of Pete’s ornate oak coat rack near the front door. “Pete, do you have an extra key?”

“Yeah, sure. It’s on a hook right near the intercom. You got it.”

Sari disengaged herself from Neville long enough for them to slip into their coats, then wrapped his arm around her again. “Well, don’t wait up, Mom and Dad. See you whenever. ‘Bye.”

The door thumped shut behind them. Pete ambled over to throw the dead bolt.

“Old folks indeed,” Donnenfeld sniffed from the couch. “She forgets that / have to wait for *her* when we jog on our beach at the Cove.”

Pete retrieved his coffee mug from the end table and took a sip. “She must’ve been referring to me, Hannah. Sure as hell couldn’t have meant you.”

“Want to play Trivial Pursuit?”

“Why should I? You always slaughter me. You’re a goddamned scientist, Hannah. You’ve got no business knowing so damned much about everything else.”

The old woman leaned forward to take a chocolate chip cookie, snatching it up as if it were about to escape. “I just happen to have vast and shallow knowledge of almost everything, Peter.”

“Bull. You even beat me on the sports questions. I *would* like to play a *form* of trivia, though.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’d like to know about Neville. When did you latch on to him?”

“Actually, he came to us,” said Hannah. “Says he’s been traveling around the country since the war started up again.” “Traveling around and doing what?”

“Helping science and defense teams shore up their computer systems. He says computers are going to be the key to winning this fight. I tend to agree with him there.”

Pete munched thoughtfully on a cookie. “Well, from what I can remember about him, he really *is* one of the top people in the field. But do you need help?”

“Places like Brook Cove Lab can always use another hand—especially a reputed all-star like Neville More.”

“I thought Mitchell Loomis was your computer hotshot.” “So did Mitchell,” Hannah said, like a mother thinking about her bright but troublesome child.

“How’s he taking the intrusion?”

“Mitchell pouts a lot these days.”

Pete nodded. “I can just see that pudgy baby face of his as More corrects him. Must be cute.”

“Cute enough to make you barf.”

“Sari certainly seems to have become attached to Neville. How long’s he been with you?”

“Oh, ’bout two weeks now,” said Hannah. “Yes, yes, Sari has taken a liking to Neville. And why not? He’s handsome, charming, witty, quite nearly a genius.”

Pete straightened in mock defensiveness. “*I’m* all those things.”

“Sorry, Pete, but he’s also got great hair. And Sari’s always gone for the slim

types. So've I, come to think of it. If I were twenty years younger—"

"Twenty? Wanna try forty?"

"Don't be rude, Peter," Hannah clucked.

The snow fell in fine flakes now, dancing before streetlights like tiny sculptures of cut crystal, then slipping gracefully from the pools of brightness down to the ground. There was almost no traffic on Fifth Avenue, no noise other than the soft scuffing of boots in the granular snow. Couples strolled arm in arm and window-shopped at Bloomingdale's and Saks. The windows of lower-priced stores were often empty these days as commonplace items grew scarce. But the finer shops still displayed their luxury wares. The war-drained economy meant few people could actually afford such things, but there was an odd sort of comfort in being able to see them, and perhaps dream of having them someday.

Sari snuggled close to Neville More as they walked. "I love Manhattan when it's like this," she murmured. "Of course, it's usually not *like* this until January." She shrugged.

"It is nice," he said. "Tranquil, unhurried. . .

"Was life ever really like that—tranquil and unhurried?" "You mean before the Visitors?"

She nodded.

"I suppose for some people," he said. "Not for me, though. Somehow I was always too busy for that. I was always selling, developing, raising money to bring some new idea to life. Oh, don't get me wrong—it was bloody exciting."

"There's a 'but' in your voice, Neville."

He chuckled. "But excitement isn't all it's cracked up to be. How about you, Sari? What was your life like before the wars?"

She gave it a few seconds' thought. "Well, Brook Cove might not be what *you'd* call exciting. None of those high-pressure deals necessary to keep you one step ahead of the creditors. The way Hannah Donnenfeld ran the lab, we didn't even have to publish. We were just one big, sometimes argumentative family of

oddballs and geniuses and social maladroits who all happened to love science. There was a *quiet* excitement in that, I guess. It wasn't exactly tranquil and unhurried. I mean we all had self-imposed motivations pushing us forward in whatever we were working on. But it was pretty relaxed. God, it seems like so long ago, I can barely remember." Sari rolled her eyes. "Geez, listen to me flapping ray gums here. You ask me a simple question and I just go on and—"

Neville leaned over and gently kissed her lips. It was a brief **kiss**.

"Uh, you trying to tell me to shut up?"

"No, not at all," he said. "When you talk, I learn more about you. And I'd like to learn as much as I can."

"Talk is cheap," Sari said, doing a Mae West impression. "I'll take shutting up any day."

They kissed again—softly at first, then gradually increasing their intensity, but still in a tranquil, unhurried way, as if they both had those words in mind. After a long time, they separated.

"Are you sure you're not getting cold, Sari?"

She stared at him, then broke into a giggle. "You must be kidding! Besides, it's not that cold. I love it when it snows like this—no wind, just a dusting of little soapflake snow. I feel like I could stay outside forever. When I was little, my mom would threaten to get the National Guard to drag me in on nights like this."

Neville grinned at her. "Oh, I'll bet you were a terror. What would you do when she called you the first time?"

With a devilish glint of reminiscence in her eyes, Sari pirouetted away from him. "I'd waltz across the lawn," she called, her voice musical. "Then I'd prance close to the porch to tease her. Then I'd do a Highland fling out to the sidewalk—pas de deux with the lightpole—and then swing a little." As she spoke, she did each dance, ending up literally gripping a street lamp and spinning around it. By now More couldn't contain his laughter.

Abruptly, Sari lost her footing and fell flat on her back. He rushed over, concern wiping the laugh off his face. "Are you all right?" he said, cradling her head.

Sari's eyelids fluttered, then she propped herself on her elbow. "And I always wound up on my ass. All these years later, nothing's changed. Except one thing."

He helped her to her feet. "What's that?"

She tugged his collar, bringing their faces nose to nose.

"When you kiss me and make it better, it's not quite the same as when Mom did it."

With a half smile of gentle lust, Neville closed his arms around her and their lips touched and opened.

"My place or yours?" Sari said in a husky whisper.

"Peter's."

Taking pains to be slow and quiet, Sari turned the key in Peter Forsythe's lock. The dead bolt slid with a maddening creak that she was sure would wake the whole building. She pushed the door and she and Neville crept into the foyer. *Good—it's dark!* she thought gleefully. She closed and relocked the door, trying to hide her nervousness. *What's he gonna think of me if I say I want to sleep with him? What are Pete and Hannah gonna think when they see us coming out of the same bedroom tomorrow morning? What do I care what anybody thinks?* With silent resolve, she held More's hand firmly in hers and pulled him along.

"Where are you going?" he whispered.

"To my room."

"And where am I going?"

His expression was neutral. She couldn't tell if he was being playful or charmingly obtuse. "My room." She continued guiding him.

"And who's going to my room?"

"Nobody."

"Oh."

He followed meekly as she hurried into the bedroom Pete had shown her earlier, and shut the door quickly and quietly. Sari prayed to herself: *Don't chicken out, stupid!* She avoided looking at Neville's face as she reflexively switched on the dresser lamp and shed her coat. Then she glanced up. As their eyes met her shoulders slumped.

"Oh, you don't want to do this, I can tell. I'm such an insensitive idiot sometimes. I just assume that somebody else wants the same thing as I do, has the same feelings. I'm so at home in a lab where everything comes so naturally, but I'm such a klutz when it comes to bedrooms. I'm really sorry if I

pushed you into anything." She found herself reaching for the door to open it and let him escape, then felt his hand turning her face up. He kissed her.

"What was that for?" she asked.

"To shut you up. What makes you think I don't want to be here? If I may be so bold, do you *always* talk yourself out of things you want?"

"No." An embarrassed smile curled one corner of her mouth. "Only when I'm overcome by extreme dumbness. Now, where were we?"

He struck a studious pose. "Ah, let me see. Well, I was about to take my coat off and turn off this lamp." He did both.

He drew Sari close to him and they drifted over to the queen-size bed. Cold, dim light came through the blinds, a shaft illuminating her face. "Then I was about to unbutton this lovely blouse."

She felt the buttons being undone, then his touch feather-light on her stomach. His hands lifted the blouse in a smooth motion. The material slipped over her skin, and her shoulders were bare. She shivered slightly.

"Chilly?" he asked, not waiting for a reply. "We'll soon take care of that, I think."

Sari shivered again, but this time because she felt the warmth of his breath on her neck as he bent to kiss her. Part of her felt like sitting back and enjoying whatever he fancied doing to her, but part wanted to return the favors. The second part won. She reached around to grasp the back of his ski sweater, then

pulled it over his head and off. With one hand, she smoothed his hair; with the other, she scraped a fingernail through the curls of fur on his chest.

Keep your eyes open, she told herself. She'd lost count of the times she'd forgotten that one sense while making love. The sounds and smells and feelings were committed to memory, but all too often the component of sight—*what he looks like*—had been sacrificed amid the other sensual pleasures.

This time she *made* herself look at Neville More. For two weeks she'd seen him with his clothing on. The man sure knew how to dress. He was tall and slim, and everything fit him perfectly. But the more she'd grown certain she wanted to wind up in bed with him, the more curious she'd become as to how he'd appear without attire worthy of *G.Q.*

So she looked. He wasn't a poster hunk-of-the-month. His shoulders weren't broad enough for that, pectorals not that well defined. But there was feline sleekness in place of brawny bulges, muscles long and smooth. He leaned back a bit, enough to slip a hand between them. With two fingers, he deftly unhooked her bra clasp and slipped the straps down her arms. She shrugged to help him get it off, then held him tightly against her cool skin. His chest hair felt warm against her breasts, and she lay down on the flannel comforter, pulling him with her.

This is going to be fun, she thought. Then, she let her eyes close. . . .

The phone rang at seven, but Pete was already up. He and Hannah Donnenfeld had gone to sleep reasonably early, and the gray light of morning had Pete's eyes open by 6:55. The voice at the other end of the line identified itself as Chief of Staff Len Katowski. William Brent Morrow was convening an urgent meeting in his Hyatt White House suite, and he wanted Pete to be there.

"Can I bring someone along?"

"Who?" Katowski asked curtly.

"Dr. Hannah Donnenfeld."

Katowski answered without hesitation. "Sure. Her input might help."

An early riser by nature, Donnenfeld was also awake and had even showered and dressed by the time Pete tapped on her bedroom door. With a quick explanation,

Pete proceeded to rush around the apartment getting ready. He scribbled a note to Sari and More, who hadn't yet stirred, and threw open the kitchen cupboards to reveal the makings of any breakfast they might want later.

Then Pete and Hannah rushed downstairs to meet the four-wheel-drive wagon Katowski sent to pick them up. With better than a foot of unplowed powder on Manhattan's streets, a four-by-four was the only vehicle that could get through.

The Secret Service driver parked the vehicle in the hotel's garage and escorted his passengers up to the top floor. They were the first to arrive at the beige suite, and the President's wife greeted them and took them to the dining room. The oval table was set for breakfast, with bagels, pastries, juice, and hot beverages.

"Just help yourself," said Mrs. Morrow. "Bill should be in any minute, and the others are on their way up." She was dressed in a gorgeously patterned silk kimono, and Hannah touched the sleeve.

"It's lovely, Mrs. Morrow."

"I wish I could wear it all the time. I picked it up when we were on a state visit to Japan."

"She would've bought up the country's entire kimono supply if I hadn't stopped her," boomed the President as he entered the room.

"He kept pulling the most wonderful things out of my hands, screaming about the balance-of-trade deficit," Barbara Morrow lamented. "If *I* were President, I'd let *you* buy souvenirs."

Morrow grinned at the teasing. "Next election I'll keep that in mind." He turned to Pete and Hannah. "Good morning, Doctors. Thanks for rollin' outa bed and into all that snow. Didn't get much of the white stuff where I grew up in Texas. Though when we did, the whole damn state'd close down," he chuckled.

They heard the suite door open and the rest of those called to the conference filed in. Lauren Stewart, representing the United Nations, was obviously the only one who'd come from outside, with her nose sniffing and her scarf still draped around her neck. She and Pete exchanged meaningful smiles. Behind her, Secretary of State Nick Draper, Secretary of Defense Stuart Hart, and Len Katowski trooped in. Everyone sat around the table and reached for food right

away. President Morrow prowled the room in plaid bathrobe and Indian moccasins, a bagel clutched in one hand “I don’t know about you all,” he said without preface, “but there’s no doubt in *my* mind the Visitors are responsible for this. Diana as much as said so when I called her last week.

Now, I *don’t*: know how she did this, but I *do* know we’re in a shitload of trouble if we don’t do something to stop it, and come up with immediate ways to make sure we’ve got ample supplies of fuel. The floor’s open for anybody’s two cents.” Secretary of Defense Hart pursed his lips. “It appears we have very little choice. We’re going to need those Strategic Oil Reserves.”

Lauren sipped a glass of orange juice. “I’m just afraid we might be too late. If I recall, Gerry Livingston said—” “Where the hell is Livingston?” said Morrow, exasperation in his voice.

“Probably picking out just the right suit,” Katowski mumbled. “Wouldn’t want to be caught underdressed.”

Hart and Draper couldn’t help snickering. There was a rustling in the hallway and Livingston strode in, wearing, of course, just the right suit and murmuring apologies for tardiness. Morrow glared at him, then looked back to Lauren.

She took the cue and continued, “Anyway, Gerry said the Visitors hadn’t been devoting much energy to actively trying to cut our supply pipelines and rail transport. Well, it looks to me like Diana is suddenly inordinately interested in *everything* that has to do with oil supplies. If we do anything to reveal the existence of those underground reserves down in Texas and Louisiana, we may be playing right into her hands.” Morrow nodded. “So what you’re saying is, we could be drawing attention to supplies the lizards didn’t know we had.” Pete raised a finger. “Lauren’s got a point. Moving it’s risky. We move it, we could lose it.”

“Ah,” said Hannah, giving a piercing look at the others, “but if we *don’t* move it, and they find it before we can do something—or if they’re fooling us and already *know* about the reserve—we still lose it. I think inertia is even more risky.” “Inertia?” Morrow questioned.

Donnenfeld leaned forward on the table. “Not changing course, Mr. President.”

There were several more volleys of opinion, and the food platters were picked

clean in the process. When it appeared further discussion would only cover familiar ground, Morrow cut it off. AH eyes turned his way. “We move the oil,” he said firmly. “That’s my decision. Anybody care to talk me out of it? This is your last chance. . . .”

He glanced mildly around the table, eyebrows arched inquisitively. There was no more debate.

“I’m taking this as a consensus then, for whatever that’s worth. It helps me to know you all gave this your best thinking and best arguing. I read over all the reports I got after last week’s meeting. Like Stu Hart said, there’s no getting away from the rock and the hard place. What we’ve decided here today could turn out to be the worst decision I could make. But I don’t think so. Not when I’ve got sharp folks like you all helping me see what I’ve *gotta* see.”

Barbara Morrow had sat in on the discussion. When her husband stopped for a breath, she spoke. “Now that you’ve got all these innocent people implicated in your decision, let’s hear the details, Bill.”

Her irreverence cracked the tension, allowing everyone to sit back and relax, at least a little. Morrow’s eyes twinkled at his wife. “No respect from the little woman.” He cleared his throat. “We’ll pump as much of the reserve oil as we can through as many different pipelines as possible. It’ll go to as many northern terminals, spread out as far as possible. From there, we’ll truck it to storage facilities in the areas where it’s most likely to be needed.”

“Sounds good to me, Mr. President,” Hannah said. “Simple—and our eggs get put in a whole lot of baskets. That’s a good analytical head on those cowboy shoulders. Ever thought of going into science when you’re all done here?”

The meeting broke up shortly after that, and Secret Service agents offered rides to anyone who had to go elsewhere in the city. On the way down to the garage, Lauren took Pete aside. “How about lunch, Dr. Forsythe?”

“Isn’t it a couple of hours early for lunch?”

“Well, I don’t have to get back to the UN until *after* lunch. Maybe if we put our heads together, we could think of some, uh, stimulating ways to spend those couple of hours.”

Pete sighed. "I would love to, Laur, but I can't."

"Aw, Peter," she pouted. "We've hardly said two words to each other all week, much less ravished each other."

"Well, why couldn't you have given me advance warning?" She turned, hands on hips. "I didn't know I'd need an appointment." The elevator reached the lobby and the doors opened. She stepped out and backed away a few feet, then stopped. "I want to remember you just like this—with a very pained expression on your face." With that, she spun on her heel and marched toward the hotel's front doors.

Hannah, already down in the lobby, sidled up to Peter. "Lauren didn't seem pleased."

"You have a gift for understatement."

"You don't look too pleased yourself. Presumably you've just turned down an offering of licentious togetherness?" "Yeah," Pete said glumly.

"Why, may I ask? Not so you can guide me back to your apartment, I hope."

"No—I made an appointment to see Denise Daltrey." Donnenfeld made a disapproving face.

"Hannah, you've got a dirty mind." She gave him a modest smile, as if acknowledging a simple truth. He hurried ahead with his explanation. "I need some facts on a particular person and I figured, who'd know better than a network news anchorperson?"

"Who're you checking up on?"

Pete tried to back away, but she latched her gnarled fingers around his wrist.

"Ow! That's a ridiculous grip for an old lady."

"Yeah, and old people are patient. I'll hold on to you till you tell me what you're up to."

"All right, all right. I want to know more about your new friend, Neville More."

Hannah's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"I'm not *sure* why."

"You couldn't even think of a *dumb* reason? You're sticking with no reason at all?"

"If I had a reason, I'd tell you. I'd just feel better knowing a little more about his background."

Pete held his arm up, as if expecting her to release him, but all she did was look straight into his eyes. "Why?" she said. "What're you, a scientist or a prosecutor?"

"No difference, Peter. We both ask questions till we find out what we want to know."

"Okay. I've just got a funny feeling about him. It's not something I can put into neat sentences yet. Just a feeling." "You ball players never were the most articulate folks on earth, were you?"

Pete let out a frustrated breath. "This resistance group of ours is a very important, close-knit bunch of people. We mean a lot to each other, personally *and* as part of the fight. When an outsider comes in and invites himself to be part of that family, I want to know everything about him. Is that so wrong, Hannah?" he asked, voice rising passionately.

Donnenfeld's lips crooked into her trademark elfin smile. "If your daughters are living with you when they start dating, you're going to terrorize all their boyfriends."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to get crazy on you. But these days, you can't trust just any Tom, Dick, or Neville."

"Is that the old world-weary, cynical Peter Forsythe coming back to roost?"

He smiled sardonically. "He never left."

Chapter 6

The Secret Service four-by-four dropped Pete off first, leaving him at the CBS News broadcast center on Fifty-seventh Street, way over on Manhattan's West Side. Hannah Donnenfeld waved to him from the front seat as the car pulled away, taking her back to Pete's apartment.

The car rounded the corner, out of sight, and Pete carefully picked his way through a snowdrift that had sculpted itself around a fire hydrant. The top of the drift curled under like an ocean wave frozen in the act of breaking.

"I wonder if we'll ever see any plows," he grumbled half aloud.

In midtown, the most massive collection of towering buildings anywhere in the world rose like a mountain range along the spine of the sliver of rock that was Manhattan Island. But the buildings here, a couple of blocks from the Hudson River, were foothills at best. Comparatively, this was a low-rent district, with a combination of warehouses, small office buildings, and apartments. The crumbling skeleton of the elevated West Side Highway decayed three blocks to the west.

In what had once been a dairy barn, Denise Daltrey and the rest of CBS's News Division toiled to keep the world up to date on the war—little else seemed worth reporting. But as Pete entered the small, functional lobby, he was reminded that there was still a world trying to get by, day to day. He stepped forward, head down, stomping his boots to knock off the snow, and nearly ran headfirst into news correspondent Charles Kuralt.

"Excuse me," Kuralt said in his mellow, friendly voice. "No, sorry, my fault." Pete started to walk past, then did a double take. "Hey, you're Charles Kuralt."

Kuralt smiled. "You're a good man to have around in case I have an identity crisis."

Forsythe decided Kuralt looked smaller and less rotund than he did on the tube—he'd always heard that TV cameras made people look wider. But the cherubic face and gently amused eyes were the same. Kuralt had gained fame for his

many years of “On the Road” reports, folksy bits of Americana from the homespun tapestry of everyday life.

Struck by the sudden realization that he was grinning like an idiot, Pete stammered the first compliment that came to mind. “I’m—I’m really glad you started doing the ‘On the Road’ stories again. I think it means a lot for people to see something upbeat in the middle of all the war news.”

“Well, thanks, Pete,” said Kuralt. “It means a lot to us to give folks a reason to smile every so often.”

Pete blinked. “Have we met?”

“No, no, but I’ve always been a big baseball fan.” Moving closer, Pete lowered his voice confidentially. “Isn’t it dangerous, going around the country in that motor home to do your stories?”

“We try to stick to secure areas, but risk’s always part of what we do in this business,” Kuralt said, his voice matter-of-fact.

Pete extended his hand and they shook warmly. “Don’t take *too* many risks, Mr. Kuralt. We don’t want to lose you.” “You take care of *yourself* too. You people in the resistance are tough to replace. Hey, I hear you like to fish.”

“Sure do,” Pete laughed. “I grew up near a stream in Virginia.”

“After all this is over, I’ll take you to some of my favorite spots down home in North Carolina.”

“I’d like that,” said Pete with a nod.

Kuralt zipped his parka, gave Pete a salute, and went out into the street.

Denise Daltrey brushed a strand of sable hair off her cheek, then glanced up as she heard a tapping on her open office door. Pete leaned in and she greeted him with a sparkle in her sapphire-blue eyes.

“Hey, good to see you!” She leapt up to give him a hug. “I just bumped into Charles Kuralt in the lobby. He invited me to go fishing with him sometime.”

“Charlie’s a sweetheart. Go. You’ll have a great time. Want some coffee?”

“No thanks, Denise. So how’ve you been?”

She slouched back in her desk chair as Pete sat, too. “Working like a crazy lady. Obviously we’re kind of short-handed around here. And everybody donates time to working for the Freedom Network, too. Not that he likes reporting war news, but Howard K. Smith was thrilled to come out of retirement to be the Freedom Network anchor.”

“Yeah. In a way it’s reassuring to see Smith and Severeid and Cronkite. I mean, these are the last of the guys that covered World War Two. They saw that one close up, and I really feel like they’re the best people to put *this* war into perspective.”

Denise grunted in agreement. “Well, I did what you asked.” “And what did you find out?”

She pulled a file folder from the pile of papers on her desk and flipped it open. “Neville More has quite the checkered past.”

“Tell me a story.”

Laying the folder on her lap, she went on. “Well, he’s thirty-four, devilishly handsome—”

“I know that.” Pete scowled. “The women make that very clear.”

“He’s got great hair—”

“*Denise. ...*”

She held up a black-and-white glossy, a smiling corporate publicity still of More. “Well, he *does*.” She paused playfully. “Okay, okay. He’s made and lost a couple of fortunes in the computer industry.”

“A couple?”

“Mm-hm. He started from scratch, just a nobody drop-out from Oxford.”

“Nobodies don’t even get *into* Oxford, much less drop out, sweetie pie. Why did he drop out?”

“I combed the file on him, and the only reason he ever gave, publicly at least, was that he’d learned everything he needed to know.”

“Cocky son of a bitch, I’ll grant him that.”

“He evidently had reason to be. He came to the U.S. when he was twenty-two, with about fifty dollars to his name. By the time he was twenty-six, he was worth ten million.”

“What did he invent?”

“That’s just it—he didn’t invent anything. But he knew how to pull other people’s potentially useful inventions and ideas together and make them work in the real world. Shall I go into detail?”

“You made copies of everything for me?” Pete asked. “Yeah. This file is yours to cherish.”

“Then I’ll read the details myself later. Go on to the part where he lost the millions.”

“Common story. He sold out his share of Magicomp for mucho money, did some wild investing, then someone pulled the chain and it all got flushed away,” Denise said with a shrug.

“What happened to him after that?”

“Weil, he sort of disappeared for a couple of years. Some people said he went off to gamble in the sunshine, some people said he spent most of his time drunk, some people say he holed up somewhere thinking of ways to get back to the top.” “What’s your best guess, Denise?”

“I’d say some of all three. But the point is, five years later he was back on top. That’s when he made the covers of *Time*, *Fortune*, *Business Week*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *People*. All in one month.” She flipped a page in the file.

“Okay, so everybody in the field hailed him as a genius again.”

“No, no,” Denise corrected. “Not *again*. The first time they called him lucky, and when he flopped, they called him a flash in the pan. He said in one interview that *he* always knew he was a genius, or pretty damn close to it. But he wasn’t going to be satisfied until the *rest* of the world knew it *and* admitted it.” Her mouth bent into a quizzical semismile.

“Something funny?”

“No, not funny exactly. More like quirky. When those magazines came out, he went and bought a thousand copies of each one. Kept them piled in a room in his house, and every now and then he’d go up there and just wade among all those covers with his face on ’em.”

“For all his genius, Neville More sounds pretty insecure,” Pete concluded. “You said he lost more than one fortune.” “Mmm, yeah. For the next few years he seemed to calm down. Less of the wild life, more ballets and museum openings. He became something of a patron of the arts, donating money here and there in the U.S. and the Continent. He almost never allowed interviews after those covers.” “Wouldn’t be the first public figure to want to quit while he was ahead, as far as submitting to media torture is concerned. ” “That’s true,” Denise said conditionally, “but he’d drop hints in the professional journals that he was developing something astounding. ’ ’

“What was it?”

“That was the strange thing—there was never any formal announcement or introduction. Nothing ever went on sale. One day, without any fanfare, Neville More simply filed for bankruptcy. ”

Pete squinted in confusion. “Just like that? And it didn’t make headlines?”

“Well, it would have, but look at the filing date.” She turned the folder so Pete could see, then took it back as he nodded.

“Two days later the Visitors reinvaded,” he said.

“Kind of overshadowed the other major news items of that week,” Denise said. “I tried to find some record of what he’d been working on—even speculation.”

“And?”

“What I found might not even qualify as speculation—more like totally unsubstantiated rumor.”

“Any port in a storm. ...”

Denise chuckled. “Who has the most money in the world to spend on fancy computers and software?”

“My daughter, Karen,” Pete deadpanned.

“Try again. The Pentagon?”

Peter’s eyes opened in dawning amazement. “Ahhh. Something top secret maybe? That would account for the whole thing being so quiet. Total lack of flamboyance doesn’t seem to be More’s style. Got any proof?”

Her head dropped, dark hair falling across her eyes. “Not a smidgen.”

“Hmmm. Too bad. What do you think of his story about traveling around helping computer people fight the war?” Denise placed the folder on her desk and stretched. “I don’t know. If there’s anyone who knows enough to do that sort of thing, Neville More’s the one. You say he’s out at Brook Cove helping Hannah now?”

“Yeah.”

“If you really want to know if he’s on the up and up, seems to me you should go out there and find out if he’s really *helping* them. That’s what I’d do.”

Suddenly alarms sounded in the corridor. “What the hell is *that!*” Pete jumped from his chair.

Denise hurried out of the office, grabbing him by the hand. “Come on!”

They trotted down to the end of the hallway where there was a window. From the street they could hear the blaring of alert sirens.

Pete’s voice was numb. “A Visitor air raid? They haven’t tried anything like that in weeks.”

“Let’s go,” said Denise, pulling him toward the emergency stairwell. “The shelter’s downstairs. Teletypes, too. If there’s any information coming in, we’ll get it first.”

There weren’t many employees in the CBS building, and the downward exodus was hurried but orderly. Heavy steel doors blocked off the shelter room. It was a large chamber, an oddly high-tech bunker—sandbags nestled close to TV monitors, radio transmitter-receivers, a few computer terminals, and a variety of other electronic gear. Cartons of food and canned drinks stood in the corners.

The televisions were tuned to the Freedom Network, the studios of which were in secret locations known only to the handful of people who worked there. Even the members of the resistance didn’t know. All Pete had been told was that there were several studio and transmitter locations to help insure that the vital information source would be able to stay on the air no matter what.

Right now it was the calm face of Walter Cronkite on screen, his deep voice carefully modulated to avoid spreading panic. Pete could see a special pride in the CBS employees as they listened to their old anchorman.

“This is Walter Cronkite, with a Freedom Network bulletin. Authorities urge New Yorkers to go to the nearest air raid shelter, if you’re not already there. Shelters are marked with the standard Civil Defense insignia.” A graphic illustrating the yellow and black symbol appeared on screen next to Cronkite’s face. “Visitor skyfighters have been sighted approaching New York City. Anti-aircraft batteries installed to protect the nation’s temporary capital are manned by resistance forces, and fighters are being scrambled from bases in New Jersey. We have no further details on the strength of Visitor forces, nor are there any reports of actual battle contact yet. Stay in your neighborhood shelters until the all-clear signal has been given. That’s three short blasts on the warning siren. And stay tuned to your local Freedom Network radio and TV channels. As soon as we have further news to report, we’ll return to the air. Until then, we return you to regular programming at the point at which it was interrupted.”

The Freedom Network logo replaced Cronkite on the monitors. “We now return to ‘The Mary Tyler Moore Show.’ Stay tuned to this station for further Freedom Network bulletins. ...”

And then they were watching Lou Grant chewing out WJM anchorman Ted

Baxter. The juxtaposition made Pete shudder inside, but he knew that local TV stations were playing a preponderance of comedy reruns as a rather obvious way of bolstering the public mood.

He also knew that the sky over New York was about to become a war zone and that there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. Some members of the news staff wandered back to their assigned emergency work stations. But not everyone had a task down here in the shelter. Immediately necessary jobs were doled out by duty roster. The others munched snack foods, watched Lou and Ted and Mary on the tube, or huddled in small groups.

No matter what they were doing, everyone in the CBS shelter stiffened at the first rumbling of laser blasts and explosions coming from street level, shaking the foundation of the building.

"I hate this part," Pete said quietly to Denise, not wanting to intrude on the general hush of the chamber.

"Which part? It's okay—Lou and Ted don't really hate each other. And Mary makes Lou smile in that cynically gruff way of his by the end," she said, gesturing toward the TV.

Pete grinned ruefully, in spite of himself. "Funny girl. I meant being stuck down here, blind, not knowing what's happening up there, and not being able to help."

"You'd rather be up there getting shot at?"

He nodded briefly. "Sounds nuts, doesn't it? I spent the early years of Vietnam worrying I'd get drafted. And now my reflex is to run out and shoot back."

"That's not so nuts, Pete."

"Did you ever report on a war—I mean before the Visitors?"

Denise shook her head, her face solemn, blue eyes open wide as she recalled an image.

"What're you thinking about?" asked Pete.

"The Vietnam Memorial in Washington. Have you ever been there?"

“Meant to visit it. I had friends who got killed in the war. But I never got to see it.”

“Well, I covered it, the Veterans Day before the Visitors came back. It was my first time. I saw pictures of the wall before, but it’s nothing like seeing it in person—this low, black vee of granite. Like a wound, dug right into the ground. Then you get closer and you can see the names, fifty-thousand dead, etched into the stone like white scars that won’t ever go away. ”

Denise closed her eyes, composing herself. When she continued, there was a hitch in her voice. “I expected to see little American flags and flowers and wreaths. But there were other things, things I’ve never seen at any other war memorial or cemetery.”

“Like what?”

She laughed and wiped a pair of tears off her cheeks. “A bottle of Southern Comfort and a snapshot of a chopped and channeled ’fifty-seven Chevy, with a note saying, ‘Cruisin’ ain’t the same without you, Hank.’ We were there to do a story, you know? And I felt like a ghoulish intruder on the privacy of the people who’d come to mourn, to touch those names on the wall. Names of people they loved. So I had the camera crew stay back, and I just went up to the wall myself. I found the name of a reporter I knew. Actually, I met him when I was in school and he came to talk to the journalism class. He got killed in ’seventy-one. And then this woman, she was in her fifties, I guess, nothing special about her, she came up and found a name near me, and she reached into her tote bag and took out this scraggly teddy bear. I watched her—she knelt down and sat it on the strip of grass and she pinned a note card to it.” Denise took a deep breath.

“It said, ‘Dear Tony—No mom ever had a better son. Until we can hug again—Love, Mommy.’” She laughed again, not bothering to touch her tears now, and she leaned on Peter’s shoulder. “Hell, Pete, I was crying like a little girl by then, but she had this peaceful look on her face. And she held my hand. God, the way I was crying, she must’ve thought *I’d* lost a brother or my father.”

“Did she know who you were?”

“No. Not till after I told her. But first she just sort of comforted me. Then I managed to control myself enough to ask, why the teddy bear?”

“What’d she say?”

“She smiled and said, ‘The day he was bom, it was the first thing we gave him. I want him to have it now.’ Well, that was when I said who I was. And I told her we were there to do a story, and how would she feel about being interviewed on camera. I told her I would never intrude without her permission, but she said it was fine with her.”

“I remember that interview, I cried when I saw it.” “Yeah, well, what you didn’t see—because we kept the camera on her impossibly serene face—was me, just out of range, holding the mike for her and crying my eyes out.” Pete swallowed, and there was a tremor in his voice as he held her hand. “I wonder if this war’s dead’ll have a memorial?”

“The whole planet’ll be a kind of memorial—if we survive.”

Chapter 7

While a dozen sleek alien fighters strafed New York City, one small vessel flew, swift and silent, over to Staten Island and searched for a different sort of target. The hilly eight-by-twelve mile island at the southern end of New York Harbor was much more sparsely populated than the city's four other boroughs, due in part to the fact that it had been linked to the rest of New York only by ferry until the early 1960s.

Development had reached Staten Island in fits and starts and had included chemical and petroleum storage facilities. With all of the city's defenses aimed at the main Visitor squadron attacking the other areas of New York, the lone ship banked and made a treetop approach, landing at an oil-tank complex on the island's western shore, hugging the coast of New Jersey.

Two men in blue parkas hunkered in the doorway of the small building that served as the tank facility's office. A half-dozen delivery trucks were parked nearby. The taller of the men took his glove off to wipe his running nose. He was ruddyfaced with a salt-and-pepper beard, and he turned to his companion.

"Shit, they're here," he said, voice trembling with fear.

His shorter companion, a burly black man, shook his head. "Hell, Ronnie, we shouldn't be doing this. We can't— I don't wanna—"

Ronnie grabbed his co-worker roughly by the shoulders.

"Do you wanna see your wife and kids again, huh, Cassidy?"

They got our families. If you don't believe the lizards'll kill 'em if we don't do this, then you've got shit for brains." The black man brought his hands to his face, choking back a sob. "It was goddamn human traitors took our wives and kids and gave 'em to the Visitors. If we do this, we ain't no better than they are. Are we?" He got no answer and shook free of Ronnie's grip. "Are we?" he repeated fiercely.

The gull-wing hatches in the side of the Visitor skyfighter swung up, and four

aliens in red coveralls and protective breathing masks climbed out. The pair of frightened workmen watched as barrels the size of oil drums were unloaded from the spaceship.

“How the hell can I answer that?” Ronnie said in a guttural whisper. “I’m a goddamn oil-truck driver—I’m not a traitor.” His voice rose, panic forcing into his tone. “I’m *not* a traitor and neither are you. We’re just a couple of guys who want our families back, that’s all.”

“You mean anybody’d do what we’re doing—right?” Cassidy’s dark face pleaded for absolution, as if from the God he knew must be watching. “I ain’t no sinner, Ronnie.” The Visitor captain was approaching now, his troopers hauling the barrels behind him. Cassidy and Ronnie moved closer to each other, trying to draw comfort from human contact, steeling themselves for the thing they dreaded. “You ain’t a sinner,” said Ronnie.

Snow crunching under their black boots, the aliens came closer. “God forgive me,” Cassidy whispered. He shrank back, leaving his friend to face the tall, dark-skinned Visitor in charge. The aliens wore their usual dark glasses, even though the sky was a slate-gray overcast.

“Mr. Bortelli, Mr. Cassidy,” said the Visitor in a clipped cadence. “Diana hopes you haven’t changed your minds about our agreement.”

Ronnie Bortelli realized he’d let his shoulders slump. He stiffened his posture, summoning whatever dignity he had left. “We don’t have any choice. If we did, we’d spit in your eye.” “If that’s a common human reaction, it’s rather distasteful. But you’re correct—you have no choice. That is, if you care about the safety of your families. Now then, these drums contain the substance you are to add to the heating oil tanks.” He handed a folded sheet of paper to Ronnie. “These are the instructions as to amount. Follow them to the letter. They’re simple enough. I trust you’ll have no interference from other workers?”

“We’re the only ones here today.”

“Wh-When can we see our families?” said Cassidy.- “When do we get ’em back?”

“Ah, the black one speaks,” the Visitor said disdainfully. Bortelli balled his fists and took a threatening step forward. “You son of a bitch,” he growled.

Four laser pistols were raised in unison, their meaning clear. But Ronnie Bortelli held his ground. “Answer his question.” “That’s not my responsibility,” the Visitor said mildly. “But I’d guess you’ll get your answer after you’ve completed your assignment. Oh, and I’ll warn you just this once. The human collaborators who helped us, uh, obtain your cooperation will have you under surveillance. We’ll *know* if you do as you’ve been ordered.”

Ronnie’s jaw tightened. “We’ll do it. But if you lied to us, if we don’t get our families back, safe and sound, then heaven help you, you bastards.”

The alien captain inclined his head fractionally, and an eerie sound that could only have been laughter filtered through his breathing mask. Then he nodded to his three soldiers and led them back to the skyfighter, leaving the drums on their wheeled dollies.

“Hey,” Cassidy shrilled. “When do we get our families back, man?”

The Visitors didn’t even stop. The captain simply called over his shoulder, “You’ll be contacted when the time comes. If you attempt to tell your authorities about this, you’ll be killed before you can succeed. I promise you that.”

Then they climbed back into their vessel. Its quiet thrusters kicked up a cloud of blowing snow as the craft lifted into the sullen sky, drifted southeast, and accelerated out of sight.

* * *

As abruptly as it began, the Visitor attack on New York ceased. Air Force fighters had just arrived from their base to the west in New Jersey. Instead of engaging the jets in dogfights as they usually did, the alien ships switched to evasive action, keeping just out of range of the planes’ rockets and Cannons. The odd maneuvers persisted for about twenty minutes, with the Visitors making only oblique efforts to actually fire on ground targets. Then, as if on cue, the alien skyfighters regrouped into orderly formation, veered, and roared off at top cruising velocity, which was considerably faster than their attack speeds. Unable to keep up, the Air Force squadron held their fire and watched the Visitors flee back to the Mother Ship. It couldn’t accurately be counted as a human victory; the strange airborne minuet had been more like a nonengagement.

Pete called the city’s emergency services number, set up to direct medical and

rescue personnel to where they were most needed following enemy raids. To his great surprise, there were only minimal casualties, no known fatalities, and the situation was being easily handled by regular hospital and EMT crews.

The all-clear sirens sounded through city streets, and Walter Cronkite came back on television to assure Freedom Network viewers that the attack was over and it was safe to emerge from shelters.

When Pete and Denise returned to her upstairs office, he used the phone to call Lauren at the UN. “You okay over there?”

“Yes, we’re all fine. Thank God.”

“I don’t think God had much to do with it.”

“Huh? What do you mean, Peter?”

“I don’t know. Just that it was a very half-hearted raid.” “You sound disappointed,” said Lauren.

“No, just confused and uneasy. Why would Diana bother to launch an attack on New York City and not hit anything?” “Maybe we’re finally tiring them out,” Lauren suggested brightly. “They *are* a long way from home, their supplies *have* to be running low. All those laser weapons have to have a finite life span. High tech as they are, things do break. They can’t have, an endless cache of spare parts.”

“Those are all good points,” Pete said into the phone, noticing that Denise’s interest was piqued by the conversation, of which she could hear only half.

“But?”

“But I don’t think they *meant* to devastate New York City today. I think it was a diversion.”

“For what?”

Pete blew out a long breath. “Damned if I know. And that’s what’s got me worried. Oh, by the way, I’m sorry we couldn’t have that early lunch. How about an early dinner?”

“I accept your peace terms, Peter. Pick me up here at four, four-fifteen?”

“Sounds good. We can visit Guido’s, have him cook up something special.”

“And after?” Lauren wondered.

“Oh, you’re creative. You’ll think of something.”

“Diana, we’ve got no *choice*!” Lydia said, sharply enough that the entire bridge crew reacted. Some turned openly, others tried sly glances, but none of them wanted to miss a public confrontation between the ship’s two senior officers. Through the long, wearying occupation of Earth, it had become a rather interesting spectator sport, a rarity for most of the ship but increasingly common on the bridge, where Lydia and Diana were most likely to be together at any given time.

Diana paced, her fury barely controlled. “Why didn’t we know this would happen beforehand?”

“Perhaps if I’d been more closely involved, we would have,” came the security officer’s cool reply.

“I sincerely doubt that,” Diana parried. “Are you certain these figures are right?” She stabbed a finger at the computer screen next to them, where an array of writing and numbers led down to a bottom line that flashed in warning red.

“I checked them myself. Your magnificent Project Icewind uses a full forty-three point nine percent more power than you originally figured.”

“My science staff made the error, Lydia, not I.”

“Yes, Diana, but you’re in charge. No matter—the result is the same. The field generators are seriously draining the Mother Ship’s engines. If you don’t suspend operations immediately, they’ll be damaged beyond repair. I don’t think the Leader will be happy to find out that you’ve been responsible for turning six more ships of the line into drifting hulks.”

Anger recharged, Diana whirled, took two rapid strides, then halted with her back to Lydia. “Very well, order the Icewind ships to shut down their generators and resume normal patrol posts.” She leaned thoughtfully on the computer panel.

“Hmmm—the weather-alteration effects should continue for several days before reverting to standard patterns. That will give me enough time to get the results of the next experiment. ”

Lydia bit her lip, hoping Diana didn’t notice. Just when she thought she’d turned the commander’s own blunder against her and won this one battle at least, Diana had managed to slither away and open a new front Lydia knew nothing about. “What experiment?”

“I’ll let you know—in my own good time,” Diana said, moving toward the exit hatch.

“That’s what you said about Project Icewind,” Lydia volleyed. “Look where your secrecy got you that time.”

“I don’t make the same mistake twice, Lydia, darling.” The door slid shut behind Diana, leaving Lydia to endure the furtive looks of the curious bridge crew.

The maintenance man’s arms flapped like plaid wings sticking out of a plump down vest. He watched from the office building’s freight dock as the oil truck rolled to a stop and a lanky, bearded man jumped down from the passenger side of the cab.

“Hey, am I glad to see you guys!” the maintenance man called. “We’re down to, like, the bottom of the barrel, y’know?”

Ronnie Bortelli flicked the vaguest of glances up at the young custodian, then yanked the pumper’s hose nozzle out of its niche on the truck’s side.

The maintenance man scowled. “Hey, you’re real friendly today, fella,” he said sarcastically. “Whatsamatta, the wife holdin’ out on ya?”

Bortelli stopped and stared at the younger man.

Inside the truck Cassidy rested his head on the steering wheel. His eyes were shut tight, and a tear appeared at the corner of one. “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want,” he murmured.

Lowering his head like a bull considering a charge, Bortelli hefted the hose and pulled out a length to reach the building’s filler pipe. He screwed the nozzle into

the fitting, then went back to the control box and clicked the electric motors on. He refused to think about what he might be pumping into the storage tanks down in the basement.

The maintenance man spun and hurried back into his building. “Shit, I ain’t freezin’ *my* ass off being friendly to that jerk. I *knew* we shoulda switched to gas heat.”

Bortelli heard a distant honking from above. He looked up to see a V-shaped flock of geese, confused by the weather, flying south in early September. As they flapped over the flat suburban landscape, Bortelli recalled the image of the giant Visitor Mother Ship that had once hung over New York during the first invasion. It was gone now. Everyone knew the reinvasion force was smaller and more spread out. But in one of the ships that *had* returned to Earth’s skies, the one over Southern California, Diana had his family. They’d been gone for two weeks now, taken without warning one day while he’d been at work, driving his delivery route with Cassidy.

He had no tears left, just a feeling deep inside, deeper than he’d ever plumbed before. Ronald Bortelli had found the blinding bleakness of hopeless despair, relieved only by something that scared him to death. It was the dim, hellish light of smoldering hate, hate with two subjects in its focus: the Visitors, and himself.

Diana’s intercom chimed in the darkness of her cabin, where she reclined on her bunk. She touched the switch. “I gave orders that I was not to be disturbed.”

Lydia’s face appeared on the small bedside screen. “Our spies report that the two humans have completed phase two, as you commanded. I demand to know what phase two is, Diana.”

“You’re in no position to demand anything,” Diana said, her voice chilly.

“Does this have anything to do with the two human families you had kidnapped two weeks ago?”

Diana raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think that?” “The point of origin of this signal. It’s near the spot where the humans came from. Just what are you up to?”

“You’re dangerously close to insubordination, Lydia. I’d be very careful what I

said next if I were you.”

The blond officer’s lips tightened as she clearly swallowed what she wanted to say. “What are your orders, Commander?” Diana smiled. “Contact the covert agents on Staten Island. Tell them to pick up the humans Cassidy and Bortelli.” “Are they to be brought to the Mother Ship?”

“No need to waste fuel and risk a shuttle landing in human-held territory. Tell our agents to kill Bortelli and Cassidy and dispose of their bodies any way they choose. Their families are already dead. . . .”

Chapter 8

Denise Daltrey braced herself against the dashboard as Randy Carter, her driver, careened their mobile broadcast van into the office building parking lot. Police barricades had already been set up at least a hundred yards away from the four-story structure, and Carter skidded to a stop.

Zippering her ski jacket, Denise vaulted out while her two-man crew of Carter on sound and Suzy Myama on camera swung open the van's back and side doors and grabbed their equipment.

She wouldn't have much time to pull the story together, so Denise took a deep breath of damp, frigid air and surveyed the scene. At least a dozen different police, fire, and emergency vehicles were parked inside the barriers, their rooftop lights strobing in chaotic, out-of-synch rhythm. Stretchers were strewn everywhere on the snow, with victims in a variety of conditions ranging from quiet and conscious to writhing in agony to dead. Medical people worked over bodies with respirator equipment where available, or basic mouth-to-mouth techniques and CPR where it wasn't.

Denise glanced up at the building itself, noticing that plate-glass windows were smashed. When her gaze descended, she saw why.

Three corpses lay in grotesque positions on the grassy apron around the building. They had obviously broken the windows and jumped. But what were they trying to escape from?

Randy Carter came up beside Denise and handed her a double clip-on microphone. She held it in the palm of her glove. Randy pulled a woolen cap over his shaved scalp and slipped headphones on top of the hat.

"No smoke," Denise mumbled.

Carter lifted the headset off one ear and stooped slightly. "Come again, Denise?"

"No smoke."

“Why? Did they say this was a fire?”

She shook her head, then pointed to the crumpled forms of the three jumpers. “But something made them leap out those windows up there.” Her finger pointed up to the smashed glass.

“Oh, God,” said Suzy Myama, joining the other two. The camera operator and the soundman made quite an international Mutt-and-Jeff team. Randy was a tall, rail-thin black man who spoke with a Caribbean lilt, and Suzy was a tiny Japanese woman. He had no hair. Hers was waist length and shimmering black, bound in a braid to keep it out of her camera lens.

“Chemical fumes,” Carter suggested.

“But this is an office building, not a petrochemical plant,” said Denise. “By the look of the treatment being given, something definitely happened to the air in there.”

“What do you want to do?” Suzy asked.

Years before the Visitors, Denise had covered disasters like this for local TV news. She’d always hated that aspect of the job, having to rush headlong into other people’s tragedies, picking through the carnage for faces and words that would tell the story close up and in less than a minute. Those situations just didn’t come up when you covered the State Department or conducted deliberate interviews within the safe confines of the network morning news set.

But these days she had to be ready for anything. Even being a vulture again. She squared her shoulders. “Come on.”

The trio of news people walked briskly to the wooden sawhorses marked NYPD as Denise scanned the confusion for good pictures and for someone not involved in saving a life who might be able to give her solid information. Then she saw a familiar head of curly blond hair. Peter Forsythe was sitting in the doorway of a police van, slumped forward, sipping from a steaming Styrofoam cup. Denise twisted between two barricades and jogged over to Forsythe. Her crew followed as best they could. Portable video gear was still heavier than no gear at all.

“Pete!”

He slowly looked up. His down parka had blood smears on it, and his face was raw and cracked from the cold.

“What happened here?” she asked.

It took a moment for him to reply. When he did, his voice was dull. “Don’t know yet. Something spread through the building and people started gagging and choking.”

Denise shifted back to professional behavior and took a small notebook and pen out of her coat pocket. She pulled her right glove off and started scribbling. “Fatalities?”

Pete shook his head. “Not from the fumes.”

“But I saw people who looked dead lying on the grass.” “They were the ones who jumped from the top floors before the fire trucks could get ladders up to ’em.”

“How many?” Denise fought the impulse to feel sorrow and forced herself to remain businesslike.

“Dead? Five or six. I—I’m not sure. At the risk of sounding callous, this looks worse than it is,” he said, waving a hand about the parking lot.

Denise was startled. “It *looks* like a war zone, or a terrorist bombing without the bomb.”

“Most people got out of the building under their own power once they realized what was going on. Whatever got into the ventilation system affected people at different rates.”

“Is that usual?”

“Medically? Sure. In a fire not everybody keels over from smoke inhalation at the same instant. If they’d make these damned buildings with windows that open, the workers inside could’ve gotten some fresh air in to dissipate the fumes. We think the people who *were* overcome will be okay. They’ll be held in hospitals at least overnight for observation.”

Denise finished writing and clasped her hands in front of her face. “I didn’t know what to think when we drove up.” “Neither did I. I got here before the fire engines. I tried to get into the place, but people were pouring out every door. I took four steps inside and felt like vomiting. I got out fast. When my eyes stopped tearing, the first thing I saw was a guy on the fourth floor smashing a window out with a chair. He just kind of hung there on the ledge, clinging to the window frame. I yelled to him to hold on—the fire trucks were on their way.” Pete paused and shook his head sadly. “I’ll see him in my mind till the day I die. But I’ll never be sure if he just slipped or if he meant to jump. You know, when you see somebody falling like that, you get the craziest urge to run over and try to catch him, like catching a pop-up in a ball game.”

Denise touched his shoulder. “Oh, Peter. ...”

“I’m okay. I mean, I did my time in the ER. But I’ve never done anything like this, until this war. I feel like I stepped into a never-ending episode of *M*A*S*H**. And they were right. You never get used to it.”

The same thing happened at a shopping mall later that day, leading Mayor Alison Stein to call together a crisis committee for a dinner evaluation session in her City Hall conference room. As both a doctor and resistance stalwart, Pete was one of the first summoned. Joining him were Lauren Stewart; Fire Chief Bud Brinkerhoff, who’d been at both disaster sites that day; resistance member and city cop Sam Yeager, who’d also helped at the day’s toxic emergencies; and Denise Daltrey, who’d covered both.

The mayor sent out for sandwiches and drinks and cut right to the heart of the matter. “Is it possible these two incidents were coincidental?”

The fire chief, a beefy man with red hair and jug ears, rubbed his stubbly chin. He’d had no time for amenities like shaving on this day. “Possible, or likely, Mayor Stein, ma’am?”

Stein managed a brief smile. “Stop adding to my title. First-name basis here, okay? And *you* tell *me*.”

“Possible, sure—likely, no,” Brinkerhoff said.

Yeager looked at the fireman, then turned his stolid, hawk-nosed profile toward Stein. “I’d go along with Bud.” Swallowing a bite of turkey on pumpernickel,

Stein nodded.

“I take it everyone agrees with me that the Visitors may have had something to do with this?”

After murmurs of concurrence, Denise looked troubled. “But what and how?”

“There you go talking like a reporter again,” Pete joshed. Everyone smiled at the kidding, but Mayor Stein turned immediately serious again. “That’s why I wanted you here, Denise. You know how to organize an investigation, how to string seemingly unrelated facts together to form a workable premise. Would you do that for me?”

“Well, sure, Alison, but why not make it a government or police investigation?”

Stein leaned forward, her tone dropping confidentially. “I want this to be secret for now, just between the people in this room. If the Visitors did cause this, they had to have cooperation from human collaborators, I would think. We’re inside the red-dust protection zone. They can’t send their own troops and agents in, so they get humans to do their dirty work for them. That’s pretty well known. I’m afraid they may have spies inside city government agencies, even the police and fire departments. That’s why I want this investigation conducted by someone like you, Denise, a person whose *job* is to ask questions. No one will think anything’s out of the ordinary. Still want to do it?”

“I’ll do it.”

“Good. I thought I could count on you. You’ll report directly to me, and only in person.”

“Uh, Alison,” Pete said, “can I suggest bringing one more person in on this?”

“Who’ve you got in mind?”

“Hannah Donnenfeld. She’s the best damn scientist I know of, and we may need someone like her to make sense of the data we get from samples taken from the sites.”

Mayor Stein nodded. “That sounds reasonable. Stress to her the secret nature of this investigation.”

“Right. I’ll get her in on it right away and get the air and heating-oil samples out to her tomorrow morning.”

“Well, I’d like to thank you for coming here tonight,” the mayor said, leaning back in her chair. “I’ll be counting on all of you to find out what you can in your own areas of expertise. Keep your ears to the ground and all that Denise it’s up to you to collect all the pertinent data and see what it adds up to.” She lifted her soda can in a toast. “Here’s hoping we have no more emergencies to analyze.”

Six aluminum cans clinked together in agreement.

But the next day two more places were filled with noxious, invisible fumes—another office building and a hospital. Pete Forsythe drove Dr. Donnenfeld to the sites to collect whatever samples she felt she’d need to find some answers. Before returning to her Long Island lab to start work, she asked Pete to stop at Alison Stein’s office.

“Mayor Stein, I have every reason to believe these incidents are linked by heating fuel,” she announced when they arrived. “You’ve got some test results back?”

The old woman shook her head. “Haven’t even started testing. But all four places were heated by oil. I think it’d be a dandy idea for you to order all buildings, public or private, that are heated by oil to shut their boilers off and leave them off until we’ve got some facts to sink our teeth into.”

Alison chewed on the idea for a moment. “Hmmm—the sun’s finally out for the first time in two weeks. Temperature’s almost back to normal. So whatever the Visitors were doing to mess up the weather seems to be over, for the time being anyway. Okay, I think I can go along with that. But I can’t ban oil heat forever. It is going to be cold again pretty soon. Can you get me some facts in a hurry?”

“We’ll do the best we can. Now, if you and Peter’ll stop settin’ around jawing, I’ll get to work. Let’s hit the road, driver.” With a sly grin, Donnenfeld reached across the desk and shook Alison’s hand. “Have to keep these men in line,” she said conspiratorially.

“I *couldn’t* agree more.”

The Brook Cove Lab was a place Pete would never tire of. He’d concluded that

on his very first visit. Set on Long Island's north shore, where the neon and blacktop of suburban sprawl hadn't yet encroached, the lab perched on a breezy bluff overlooking Long Island Sound and Oyster Bay Harbor, not far from where Teddy Roosevelt once lived.

Hidden behind a tangle of bushes and trees, the lab's main house was a weathered Tudor mansion. A dozen other buildings and cottages were clustered to one side, where the scientists of Brook Cove had lived and worked before the alien invasion. But now the heart of the facility was the underground complex buried for security reasons by the eccentric who'd founded the lab in the midst of cold war saber-rattling in 1950. When he'd died, Walter Leiber's fortune saw to it that the lab would always have the resources to draw the best minds in science and provide them with the tools and time to pursue whatever ideas struck their fancy.

Hannah Donnenfeld, as lab director for the past twenty-odd years, had preserved that sane atmosphere. Brook Cove had prospered—a number of the fruits borne of scientific curiosity there had proven commercially attractive. It wasn't uncommon for the lab to sell the rights to its discoveries, continuing to collect a percentage as long as their finds remained commercially useful. The lab split the royalties with the responsible scientist or group of researchers, adding another incentive for people to remain there.

This carefully protected haven had been forced to change its role somewhat after the Visitors invaded, then returned for a second try at overrunning Earth. Much more of lab personnel time was devoted directly either to fighting the aliens or to helping the planet's human population cope with life under radically altered circumstances.

Donnenfeld and her team had a report on the suspect heating fuel ready by midafternoon.

"It's just preliminary," she cautioned Pete in her subterranean office. "But there's no doubt this stuff's been tainted by an alien substance."

"When you say 'alien,' do you mean alien or"—he jerked a thumb skyward, indicating outer space—"alien."

"I mean *alien*, as in Visitors."

“That’s what I thought. What do we do next?”

“We have to trace this heating oil back to where it came from—as far back as we’ve got to go to determine when and where the contamination took place.”

Pete gulped. “That means there could be a lot more of this poisoned oil making its way around the area.”

“Or around the world, my young friend.”

Hannah reached for her desk phone and punched the intercom button. The phone responded with a shrill electronic whine, and she promptly slammed the receiver back onto the cradle. “Damned newfangled gadgets,” she hissed.

“Some scientist,” Pete kidded.

“Hey, if the crank phone was good enough for me when I was growing up in Boston, it should still be good enough now. But can you *get* a crank phone nowadays? Not on your life.” “How about just a crank.”

Hannah rolled her chair back, swiveled, and stood, playfully smacking Pete across both cheeks. “A little respect, Peter.” “I can’t believe you’re resisting progress.”

“Hell, I barely even use the computer. That’s what I get all these young experts for.” She leaned out the office door and bellowed down the hallway, “*Mitchell, Neville, Sari*—get in here on the double!”

She stood, arms folded, foot tapping. Leading with his belly, Mitchell Loomis skittered around the door frame and stood at a semblance of attention.

“Hello, Peter,” he said, jowls quivering.

Pete nodded his greeting, then glanced at Mitchell’s feet. “Do you *always* wear bedroom slippers?”

“Hannah never lets me go outside,” Mitchell frowned. “Poor sweet baby,” Donnenfeld cooed.

A moment later Neville More and Sari entered, their fingertips lightly entwined.

The old lab director glared at them.

“Mitchell Loomis, the man who does the world’s best stuffed-amoeba impression, beat you two in here. You’d best move more quickly when I call you—clear?”

Now that he knew something about More, Pete wondered how this self-proclaimed genius would take to Hannah Don-nenfeld’s good-natured dictatorship. But he saw no bridling in the Englishman’s expression. Sari batted her blond eyelashes in apology.

“Now then,” Hannah continued, “I have some fact finding to do the rest of today. Might not even get back tonight, if Peter doesn’t mind a roomie in New York for the night.”

“Red Sox fans no longer welcome,” Forsythe stage-mumbled.

“As *I was saying*, you three are on your own this afternoon. Mitchell and Neville, rev up those computers. I want a total chemical analysis of the tainted oil from the four buildings. When I come back, I expect to have samples from whence the stuff cameth. If you’ve done your homework by then, we should know what we’re looking for and should be able to see in a jiffy whether it’s in the oil from the source. Sari, you make sure these two remember their molecular biology. Now, off you go.”

She shooed them out with both hands waving. Sari and More left, but Mitchell lingered, waiting until the other two had gone. “I see your feet aren’t moving, Mitchell.”

“Hannah, why are you making me work with him?” Donnenfeld sighed. “Oh, Mitchell, give me a break. I’m a crotchety old lady.”

“I don’t like him,” Mitchell said seriously. He was in no mood for Donnenfeld’s ribbing. “And I don’t *trust* him.” “Professional jealousy?” Pete offered gently.

Mitchell’s brows twitched, and a hurt look clouded his eyes. “No, Pete. It’s nothing like that. And no, Hannah, I’m not jealous of his looks or the fact that he’s making time with Sari.”

Hannah saw Pete’s confused expression. “Mitchell’s always had a crush on

Sari,” she explained. “Everybody knows it.” Pete shrugged. “/ didn’t.”

“Yeah, well, it’s no big deal,” said Mitchell. “It’s my heartache, and I can live with it. If there’s any justice in the world, Sari’ll see the light sooner or later.”

“Which has nothing to do with why you dislike Neville More, or so you say,” Hannah said.

“I may be overweight, I may be a lousy athlete, I may be the butt of everybody’s jokes around here, but no one’s ever seriously questioned my judgment. True?”

“True.”

“Then give me the benefit of this doubt.”

Donnenfeld came over to the young scientist and touched his shoulder.

“Mitchell, we need his input. We’re really up against it.”

“Are you saying I’m not good enough with our computers? I’ve been good enough for five years.”

“Of *course* you’re good enough.”

“Then let me do my job.”

“Dammit, son, I *am*, but when you’ve got someone aboard who can help, you put him in uniform and into the lineup. Right, Peter?”

Pete raised his hands, fending off any involvement. “Hey, don’t get me in on this, Hannah. You already know how I feel about the guy.”

Mitchell’s round cheeks puffed out in surprise. “You don’t like him either?”

“I just wondered about his story of going around the country like some Johnny Computer-seed, whether he’s really helping labs like this one, or just getting free room and board.” “And I assured Peter that Neville was indeed earning his keep,” Hannah said.

“If Hannah says he’s making a contribution, who am I to argue, Mitch? Sorry.”

“Mitchell,” Hannah said softly, “what is it you don’t like about him? What don’t

you trust?”

Mitchell shoved his stubby fingers deep into his pockets, shoulders rounded in a defeated slump. “He’s not a hacker.” “He’s what?” Hannah’s crinkly eyes opened in astonishment. “He’s not a *hacker*? *That’s* your objection to having a world-renowned computer genius helping us fight the Visitors?”

“You don’t understand,” said the pudgy man. He turned to shuffle away.

Pete grabbed him by the arm. “Then explain it to us.” “Hackers look like me, not like More. We love computers because we’re too odd for anyone else to love us. I’d guess that’s never been one of Neville More’s problems. When I worked at Stanford’s Artificial Intelligence Lab, we needed a place to sack out without leaving the building. The lab had one of those drop ceilings, you know? Somebody figured out that there was space up there between the ceiling and the roof, and we *slept* up there! Some guys lived in the computer center for weeks on end.”

With a suspicious expression, Pete whistled. “That’s nuts.” “That’s hacking!” Mitchell cried out, spreading his arms as if throwing himself on the mercy of some imagined court. “We might have been crazy, or at least weird from time to time, but we were completely dedicated to our computers. And we were the best. Somehow I doubt Neville More ever slept in a ceiling to stay close to his computer.”

“I’m sorry, Mitchell,” said Donnenfeld. “I need you both on this. It’s that important. Take heart—he won’t be here forever. He’ll probably move on soon. That’s been his pattern.”

Mitchell Loomis bowed his head. “Okay, I’ll make the best of it.”

She patted his cheek and he slouched out of the room. Then she turned to Pete. “Let’s get a move on. We’ve got oil to track down.”

Sam Yeager and Denise Daltrey had already begun the legwork, reviewing the records of the two office buildings, the shopping mall, and the hospital where the toxic gases had struck. All received their heating oil from a firm located on Staten Island. Sam called Brook Cove with this information just before Pete and Hannah had left for the drive back to Manhattan.

“Then Staten Island’s our target,” said Donnenfeld. “Do you know where, Sam?”

“Yeah, I’ve got an address. Why don’t you and Pete meet me at my house in Brooklyn and we can go in one car?” They did just that, trading Pete’s two-seat Mercedes for Yeager’s unmarked Ford police sedan. Yeager turned to get onto the Belt Parkway, winding along Brooklyn’s bayfront southern shore. The weather had cleared completely, and the waters of Sheepshead Bay shimmered in the afternoon sun. In the distance, the graceful span of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge stretched out to link Brooklyn with Staten Island. “That’s not all I found out,” Yeager said. “Two guys who worked for this place—they were a delivery-truck crew— they’re gone.”

“What do you mean, gone?” asked Pete.

“Vanished, disappeared. And so are their families. Nobody knows what happened to ’em.”

“Got a theory?” said Hannah from the back seat.

Sam Yeager nodded. “Matter of fact, I do. We all know the lizards’ve got people working for them—our people. Some of ’em are just scum; they’ll work for anyone who pays ’em. But sometimes the Visitors blackmail good folks. I’ve seen more than one instance myself where they’ll kidnap somebody and use that to get a family member to help them.”

“Hm,” Pete said thoughtfully. “You think that’s what happened here?”

“Yup. I think the lizards snatched the wives and kids, then forced these two poor slobs to put something into the oil they delivered. ”

“Well,” Hannah said, “the only way we can gather more proof toward that little theory is if they also put the same stuff into the main storage tanks. If we find that to be the case. I’d say that would support your theory. If we don’t, it’s just speculation.”

“Then what happened to the two missing guys?” Pete wondered.

Yeager gave a short shrug. “When they did what they were told, they expected to get their families back. Instead, they got killed. Simple as that.”

When they arrived at the oil tanks, Yeager flashed his badge at the employee who asked what they wanted. Dr. Donnenfeld took out her collection jars and went to each of the company's five storage tanks, taking about a quart of oil from each filling spigot. She carefully labeled the containers, capped them, and started for the car.

"I hope the kids aren't too upset seeing me back by dinner. I sometimes think they like it better when I'm not there to order them around," she said wistfully.

"Bull," Pete replied. "Maybe they've got some good data on the site samples."

The old woman nodded. Pete could see her energy was flagging a bit. "I'd love nothing better than instant correlation.!"

The ride back to Brooklyn to pick up Pete's car was largely quiet, with each person lost in private thoughts. For Hannah Donnenfeld, usually as resilient as a watch-spring, the trip was an unwelcome opportunity to ponder a morass of doubts she'd have preferred to ignore. *Was there anything to the nebulous feelings about Neville More that Peter and Mitchell evidently shared?*

And what about this budding romance between More and Sari? Perhaps it was a cliché, but the researchers who worked under her at Brook Cove truly were the kids she'd never had, and Sari was her favorite daughter. Sari was thirty-two, with a single serious relationship behind her. When that failed nearly a decade ago, she'd come to Brook Cove and immersed herself in her career.

Hannah knew Sari had cultivated her perky image as a shell to protect the shy midwestern girl inside. She was a damned good scientist, and she'd grown comfortable playing that part. She'd chosen Hannah—who'd never married herself—as a role model.

To Hannah, that was mighty complimentary, but she wasn't certain it was good for Sari. Even in her midseventies, with all those years behind her and accolades aplenty to convince her she'd chosen the right path, Hannah still had regrets now and then. It hadn't been easy for a woman in science way back when she'd gotten out of college. Most job offers began and ended with, "*How fast can you type, do you take shorthand, and how good's your coffee, honey?*"

Eventually she and her Ph.D. found a niche. But the single-minded determination it took to establish herself in her field meant little time for love.

After a while the urge for intimate companionship had become so well trained, it almost never bothered to make a fuss.

Hannah wanted more for Sari. But did that mean *Neville* More? Was he someone she'd want her surrogate child involved with?

Professionally, Hannah was concerned that these soap-opera-plot machinations might interfere with their work. That she simply couldn't allow, no matter how painful it might be to stop it.

Mostly, Donnenfeld coveted a few hours' restful sleep—an escape from responsibility. *Just for one night, but I've got a feeling it won't be tonight.*

Chapter 9

Like a watering hole in the center of an oasis, with vast and barren lands stretching all around it, the Persian Gulf had been giving life since before the first nomadic Arabian tribes peered into its shallow waters and saw silvery schools of fish swimming close to shore. The ancient ways still worked, and today's fishermen relied on the methods taught by fathers to sons for more generations than anyone could remember. By oar and pole, they used their flat-bottom boats to herd fish into wide netted corrals, pulled the ends of the nets up to keep the fish in, then scooped their catch into the boats.

"Did you ever do that?" Lavi Mayer asked his companion. The two men were dressed in the loose-fitting robes and white linen burnouses of itinerant bedouins. They lay on their bellies on a dune overlooking the shimmering Gulf. A pair of horses waited patiently behind them, nibbling gently on a scrubby desert bush.

"My family wasn't involved in fishing," said the other man, his cultured British accent contrasting with the unique speech pattern that identified Lavi as a *sabra*, a native-born Israeli whose English was an amalgam of the many Eastern and Western tongues spoken in the Jewish state.

An unyielding sun had baked Lavi's thin nose and hollow cheeks to a reddish bronze, and he wished that he'd used stronger sun-screen lotion.

As if reading the Israeli's mind, the man with the English accent said, "You're getting rather sunburned there."

Lavi Mayer made a pained face. "Do you Arabs always feel compelled to state the obvious, Abdul?"

"Only when my Jewish partner is going to regret his lack of preparedness," Abdul said with a flashing grin. His broad, handsome face was dominated by a pointed blue-black beard and heavy eyebrows that met above his nose. His medium-brown complexion made it clear that he wouldn't have to worry much about getting burned himself.

Lavi leaned on his elbows, and his sleeves slipped down to reveal thin arms rippling with ropy muscles. “What’s a nice Jewish boy, approaching middle age—could you tell I’ll be forty in two years?—doing laying in the sand with a Saudi Arabian fellow who speaks like Prince Charles? Answer me that!”

“Yes, I could tell you’re going to be forty in two years.”

The Israeli looked hurt. “How?”

Abdul reached for Lavi’s head covering and lifted it off one temple. “Got a spot of gray creeping in on the reds and browns. Now, as for what you’re doing mucking about in the Arabian desert, we’ll soon find out, both of us.”

“Where *did* you pick up that accent?”

Abdul hesitated. “I, uh, I attended school in England for a bit.” Then he tensed and squinted.

“See something?” Lavi asked.

Both men pulled binoculars out from under their robes and scanned the cloudless sky.

“Damn!” Abdul said.

“What? I don’t see.” Lavi lowered his binoculars to ascertain where his fellow observer was looking.

The Arab pointed, but by now they didn’t need any magnification aid to see that five Visitor skyfighters were flying down from the north. All were equipped with harnesses that hung below them, slinging what were unmistakably the components of a drilling platform. As Abdul and Lavi watched, the Visitor ships slowed, swiveled in the air over the Gulf waters as if hunting for a particular spot, then hovered and lowered their equipment.

One craft set a remote-guided boat down on the sea’s surface. It was a squat, flat-topped thing, floating low in the water, and its airborne operators skillfully maneuvered it to assist in depositing the platform parts.

“That’s a very ingenious design,” Lavi said. “I bet they’ll have that thing

anchored and assembled in less than an hour or two.”

Abdul stared at him. “Perhaps you’d like to go out there and slap them on the back. Good show, old boy!”

“Sorry,” Lavi shrugged. “What do you think they’re going to use this for?”

“I haven’t the foggiest notion, but we better get back to Gamel and radio this back to HQ.”

The President waved Pete, Mayor Stein, and Dr. Donnenfeld over to the living room couch, then lowered himself into the deep cushions of a high-backed armchair. He was dressed in blue jeans and a red-plaid flannel shirt open several buttons below the neck to reveal silvery chest hair.

“Mr. President,” Donnenfeld chided, “I haven’t seen you in a business suit in ages.”

He ducked his head sheepishly. “I gotta admit this informal hotel-suite presidency has me spoiled. Now, what have you folks got to tell me?”

Pete and the mayor deferred immediately to Hannah, who opened a tiny leatherbound notebook she had fished out of the side pocket of her bulky cardigan. “Well,” she said, “instead of the old good news-bad news routine, this is sorta both rolled into one, Mr. President. We’ve got a firm match. The substance found in the heating-oil samples taken directly from the buildings where we had those mishaps last week is also in the big storage tanks at the Staten Island company that delivered the oil.”

“Direct link, huh, Doc?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Alison,” Morrow said, “you haven’t had any other incidents, right?”

“No, sir.”

“And I haven’t gotten any reports of anything like this happening anyplace else in the counliy. Seems isolated, and contained.”

“Yeah,” Pete interjected, “but the only reason we were able to contain it here is because the weather suddenly got warmer and we could get by without using heat.”

“And we can pretty much assume the Visitors had something to do with the oddball weather,” Morrow said. “What’re you sayin’, Pete—that whatever the Visitors did to give us that cold snap ended before they intended it to?”

Forsythe nodded. “Seems pretty likely.”

“I’ll go along with that,” said the President. “That also means we can expect more of the same from the Visitors— more weather disruption and more contaminated oil.” No one disagreed, and Morrow went on. “Dr. Donnenfeld, have you got us a way of testing oil for this poison they slipped in there?”

“Not just yet, sir. The system we used is a tad on the unwieldy side. But with a little more work, I think we’ll have a test that can be done right where the oil is stored, without dragging samples back to the lab. Kind of a litmus-type test.”

“Good. Let me know as soon as you’ve got that ready. We’ve gotta be prepared, gotta know how much safe oil we’ve got for when nature gives us our regularly scheduled winter— or in case Diana throws another surprise our way.”

“Will do,” the old woman said with a salute.

They heard a commotion out in the suite’s hallway. Before Morrow could react, Chief of Staff Katowski and Secretary of State Draper had rushed into the living room.

“Mr. President,” Katowski said, his Adam’s apple bobbing nervously, “I thought you should hear this right away.” Morrow regarded his aide’s ashen face. “I’m not gonna like this, am I?”

“I’m afraid not, sir.”

“Well, you look like you could use a seat, Len, so come on in and park yourselves.” Morrow reclined and closed his eyes. “Okay, boys, let’s have it.”

“Report from the Middle East, sir,” Nick Draper said in his soothing Virginia drawl. “Seems the Visitors are constructing an offshore rig in the Persian Gulf. Can I show y’all a map?”

Morrow leaned forward. Draper took that as an affirmative signal and opened his briefcase, spreading a chart out on the coffee table. Everyone else gathered around so they could see.

“Here’s where they’ve planted it, sir,” Draper continued, pointing to a red cross drawn just off the Saudi Arabian coast. “Is that strategic?” Morrow asked.

“I’m afraid it is. It’s near a city called Safaniya, and it’s right on top of the world’s biggest offshore oil field. Let me give you a little background. The oil industry is centered on Saudi Arabia’s eastern coast here. A little way south of Safaniya is a place called Ras Tanura. That’s where most of the refineries and tankers are.”

“What’s the military situation, Nick?”

“Well, sir, as you’ll recall, some of the Arab nations realized right after the first invasion that they had a valuable commodity worth protecting—oil. So they formed a common defense force to protect their main oil fields as best they could, with a blood promise that the countries who benefited from having their oil protected would help the others out financially, *if* the Visitors were ever defeated. The Persian Gulf states started out with a force strength of about a hundred sixty thousand troops. About half of those survived the initial fighting with the aliens. They were on the run, though, until the Israelis offered to join up with ’em.”

“You’re kidding!” Hannah interrupted, openly astounded. “The Israelis and the Arabs cooperating?”

“Yeah—didn’t you know about that?” Peter asked.

“Hey, I’m just a scientist. I’m not privy to all the resistance gossip you get, Peter. How are they doing?”

“Practicality seems to be the watchword. They’re still working together,” Draper said. “Israel managed to secure most of its territory almost immediately. The whole country mobilized, and the Visitors decided it was easier to leave them alone for the time being and conquer them later.”

Morrow allowed himself a gallows smile. “The lizards’ll be in for a big surprise.”

“Anyway, the combined forces of what’s left of those armies, plus a solid underground network—well, sir, they’ve managed to keep the dry-land oil fields safe in Saudi Arabia.

But all they can do is hold the ground they’ve got. They just don’t have the firepower to take on the Visitors offshore.” Morrow laced his fingers together and looked at the map. “When did they start working on this platform in the Gulf?” “Last night, our time,” said Draper.

“Any idea yet what it’s for?”

The Secretary of State shook his head. “No, sir. The only details were that it looked like something that could be used for drilling.”

Morrow clicked his teeth together as he turned pensive. “Drilling . . . drilling . . . why would the Visitors be drilling for oil? What do they need oil for?” He shook his head, drawing a blank, then turned to Donnenfeld. “I hate to give your lab folks another thing to do, but point some of those brains at this. Okay, Doc? Any and all theories are more’n welcome.”

The meeting broke up, and Pete escorted Hannah down to the Hyatt’s lobby. “Hey, Hannah, how are Mitchell and Neville getting along?”

“Mitchell’s behaving himself. He grumbles and bitches and moans an awful lot, which I’m frankly getting sick of. But I don’t think it’s getting in the way of the work.”

“And how are *Sari* and Neville getting along?”

The old woman raised an eyebrow. “Let’s just say they’re having an enjoyable time.” She scratched her head before pulling a tweed cap over her white hair. “I just hope she’s not getting involved so deep that she’ll moon around like a love-struck teenager when he leaves.”

“You’re so sure he’ll leave? Maybe you’re enough of an attraction to get him to stay.”

“*Sari*’s the attraction, son.”

“I meant professional attraction.”

She pressed her lips together, the corners of her mouth downturned. She shook her head slowly. “No, I don’t think so. For all his charms, Neville More doesn’t seem to be the team-player type. More the superstar on loan, the free agent.” She lowered her voice to a confidential murmur. “I’ll tell you, give me a choice between Neville and Mitch, I’d take Mitchell in a second.”

“Have you told Mitchell that? Sounded to me like he could use a confidence boost.”

Hannah threw her hands up in a parody of terror. “Ack, no! If he knew I’d never trade him for More, he’d be unbearable.” She completed her act by wiping her forehead. “Whew. Now, how’d you like to give an old lady a ride home?”

“Well ...”

Donnenfeld hooked her arm through his. “C’mon. Good home-cooked meal? I’ll let you cook anything you’d cook at home.”

He snickered. “Wow, what an offer.”

“You could also help us with this oil mess. You may be just an M.D., but you’ve got a pretty good head for pure science.”

“Flattery, Dr. Donnenfeld, has just netted you a ride home.”

“I thought about being an astronomer for a while,” Sari said as she and Neville walked along Brook Cove’s narrow beach. She turned to look back up the rocky bluff, at the lab complex just visible over the crest. The dark main house stood like a shadowy sentinel outlined against the black sky. There was no moon tonight, and they were far enough from urban clusters of illumination that the stars shone brilliantly. Even the delicate haze of the Milky Way could be seen, looking like a dusty band painted with the most delicate of brush strokes.

“What made you want to be an astronomer?” Neville asked, nuzzling her ear.

She started giggling, and he pulled back. “No, no, don’t stop,” she said.

“I thought I was tickling you.”

“No, I was laughing at what made me want to be an astronomer.”

“And that was?” He nibbled her earlobe again, pushing the high collar of her fisherman’s sweater out of the way and exposing the soft skin of her neck.

“Mr. Spock.”

“The baby fellow? I thought he was a doctor.”

“He is a doctor. *Mister Spock*, from *Star Trek*?’ She noticed Neville’s blank gaze. “You know, the TV show, the alien—you should pardon the expression with the pointed ears?”

“Oh, yes, yes. I’ve seen it once or twice. But I still don’t quite get the connection.”

“Well, Spock was from another planet, Vulcan. And I was, let’s see, about twelve years old with skinny legs and a flat chest when I first watched that show. I loved science and I was a real tomboy, so the girls didn’t want anything to do with me. But I was still too young for boys. Plus, in seventh grade no self-respecting boy *wants* anything to do with girls. So I felt like I was different from everybody and didn’t fit in, except in my own little world of baseball cards and footballs and chemistry sets and butterfly collections. And then I saw this guy Spock, who didn’t fit in anywhere either because he was a half-breed alien.”

“Is there a punch line to this?”

Sari made a playfully indignant face. “I’m baring my soul to you and you’re being abusive.”

“Sorry. Please go on.”

“The punch line is, this character was cool and in control and never let it get to him that he was different. He was also incredibly sexy—really got my pubescent libido going. So I wanted to become an astronomer and discover where the planet Vulcan was so I could find my very own Mr. Spock.” Neville tilted her chin up and kissed her softly, his tongue probing against hers in a gentle duel. “I’m glad your libido was set free.”

“Me, too. Come on with me.”

She took his hand and trotted down the starlit beach until they reached a

ramshackle dock and rough-hewn shed that doubled as a cabana and boathouse. “You’ve got something in mind?” he said.

Her eyes twinkled as she feigned innocence. “Whatever do you mean, sir?” She planted a darting kiss on his nose. “There are blankets and mattress thingies in there. ...”

“Romance and comfort, too. What more could a man ask for?”

“A two-hundred-and-fifty-dollar-a-night hotel suite, but if I were you, I wouldn’t hold my breath for that.”

* * *

1 ‘Son-of-a-bitch. I’m buck naked,’ Mitchell Loomis shrilled, juggling simultaneous feelings of embarrassment and chilly exposure. He looked around and found that he was in unfamiliar woods. But to Mitchell, any collection of trees and underbrush looked exactly the same as all others—which is to say they *all* looked unfamiliar. He was lost, he was cold, and the quivering roll of flab around his midsection notwithstanding, he was damned hungry.

“Gotta get home . . . gotta eat. . . He lurched down a path through the trees and began to run. To his great surprise, the stones and twigs he expected would be ripping his feet to shreds weren’t bothering him at all. His feet were the only part of him not undressed. They were clad in electric-blue Nikes.

Then he heard footsteps behind him. He ran faster, chubby legs churning, chest heaving. After a few moments, he could hear only his own raspy breathing, feet pounding, blood rushing in his ears like Niagara Falls. He stopped, and listened. Silence. He looked back over his shoulder. Nothing. He turned—

And screamed. Neville More stood in front of him on the trail, waving his arms like a madman, chortling gleefully. Mitchell couldn’t make his feet move, as if his sneakers had become anchored in muck. More took a step closer, then another, then from out of nowhere the Englishman had a butcher knife in his hand.

Mitchell Loomis’s eyes bulged, terror constricting his throat. The knife blade seemed to grow as More approached, taking an unbelievable amount of time to cover what couldn’t have been more than two yards’ distance. The knife reached

the length of a broadsword, gleaming lethally in the half-light.

With an imbecilic yip of near fatal fright, Mitchell leaped right out of his mired footwear and dove sideways, crashing through the foliage like a rogue elephant. From somewhere behind him More gave out a cry.

“Why does he sound like Tarzan?” Mitchell wondered aloud. Impossibly, the jungle yodel kept pace with him, bouncing inside his head as if its source was at his ear. Mitchell kept running, flailing, tripping, scrambling to some unknown haven. *Just ahead . . . just ahead. . . .*

Not far . . . not far. . . .

A greenish glow tinged the forest, getting brighter by degrees as Mitchell plunged forward. There was life-giving, life-preserving warmth there, too. Of that he was certain.

He flung aside one last overhanging branch and saw his heaven. He skidded to a stop, eyes wide with relief. The jungle cry of his tormentor had ceased—but, no, it was catching up to him, following his path. He had no choice now. To stay here was death. The warm green light was resurrection.

Mitchell pulled himself to his feet again—he’d collapsed to his knees to rest—and flung himself toward the source of the green light.

As his body arced toward it, the house-sized computer screen reached out with color-graphic hands and pressed him to its electronic bosom. He was home.

“Home, home. . . .” Mitchell mumbled. “Home . . . safe. . . .” He leaned forward.

A rude, computerized beep sounded, making him snap to a sitting position, and he found himself in his disheveled pajamas, at the small computer terminal in his bedroom. His armpits and face were drenched with cold sweat. His heart was still pounding.

“Ohh, shit . . . that was the weirdest dream I’ve ever had,” he said to the computer screen. “I can’t believe this. That goddamned Neville More did this to me—but you saved me.” He paused, took a deep breath to calm himself. “However, I *am* talking to a computer screen. Oh, well, you saved me in the dream. I might as well use you to relax a little bit. Let’s see—what was I

working on today? Oh, yeah.”

He tapped his access code into the computer, then frowned when the machine told him that file was in use on the main lab terminal, presently closed off from all other users. The embryonic flare of anger he started to feel was shunted aside by curiosity. He peeked at the digital alarm clock on his desk, wondering for a fleeting moment when he’d taken up sleepwalking.

“Who’s using the computer at three o’clock in the morning?”

He moved to slip his toes into the pair of bedroom slippers at bedside, only to find that he did in fact have a pair of Nikes on. His eyes darted nervously from side to side, and as he put his robe on, he quietly sang “The Twilight Zone” theme’s eerie four-note refrain: “Doo-doo-doo-doo . . . doo-doo-doo-doo . .

Taking care to be as close to silent as an overweight computer scientist in robe and sneakers could be, Mitchell padded down the concrete staircase leading to the main computer lab. He tiptoed around a corner and saw that the light in the room was indeed on. He halted forward progress to consider his next action. Should he surprise whoever was in there? Should he make a noise on approach to give the person a bit of polite warning? It was not completely unknown in a community of intelligent and somewhat eccentric professionals like Brook Cove to find someone struck by a late night inspiration that simply would not be deferred until morning. *This could be completely innocent. Then again, it could be Neville More waiting to kill me with a butcher knife the size of Rhode Island. I could just go back up and crawl into bed.*

No—I’ll never get back to sleep wondering. If it’s More and he tries to kill me, I’ll just scream and dive into the computer. It worked once before, why shouldn’t it work again?

He took a first step, and the rest were easier. Among the darkened labs, only the computer room’s door was open. Mitchell crooked his nose and one eye around the door frame, to see Neville More hunched over the console. Fear receded and Mitchell Loomis straightened out of his scuttling crouch.

“Burning the old midnight oil, More?” he said, his voice intentionally sharp and loud.

The Englishman was so startled he nearly fell out of his chair. Mitchell kept his

smirk of satisfaction to himself. *But this almost makes up for the nightmare*, he thought. He waited a couple of seconds, until it was obvious that Neville hadn't yet gathered his wits enough to respond.

This is getting better and better! Mitchell truly wanted to rub his hands together in glee. Instead, he batted his eyelashes innocuously. "I'm sorry, old boy. Didn't mean to give you a fright there. I just couldn't seem to get to sleep, and coming down here relaxes me. Thought I might as well use the time to get some work done, but I'll bet you had the same thought." "Er—uh, yes, yes, I did."

"Well, great minds do think alike," said Mitchell, smiling as guilelessly as he could.

Neville quickly punched in the code to put the computer terminal to sleep for the night, then turned to Mitchell. "Unless you want to use it—old boy?"

"Who, me? No, no—just strolling down here seems to have relaxed me, Neville." He yawned. "I think I'll just mosey on back to bed. C'mon, I'll walk you up to your room." Neville gave him a grim half smile. "Thanks."

"After you," said Mitchell. He waited until More had walked out past him, then clicked off the light switch. *What the hell were you doing down here—old boy?*

Chapter 10

Though he hadn't planned to, Pete Forsythe wound up spending the entire next day working alongside Donnenfeld and the others at Brook Cove. The underground facilities continued humming with activity right through lunch, with a platter of quickly devoured sandwiches as the only concession to the need for nourishment.

But teatime was a different story. War or not, the three o'clock afternoon break was one amenity Hannah refused to give up. Pete suspected that if the old woman ever found herself on her deathbed, she'd still insist on a civilized pause for refreshment and relaxation. He knew she regretted the decision to board up the main mansion for the duration of the war, but the requirements of security had made that a necessary move. Teatimes used to take place in the gracious drawing room of the old house, with its fireplace and incongruous mixture of comfy couches to one side and lab tables and equipment along the opposite wall.

To duplicate that cozy environment as closely as possible, Hannah had ordered the parlor furniture to be brought down here and arranged in a room set aside as a lounge. Someone had even put a poster of a crackling fireplace on the wall. Just as the mansion's parlor had been a place for brainstorming sessions and little presentations of project results, so the subterranean lounge had come to serve the same purpose.

The tea break was optional, and with today's urgent work continuing in all labs, Pete wasn't surprised that most of the staff pressed on with their labors. He found Hannah in the lounge with only Mitchell, Sari, and Neville More joining her. The genteel tinkling of spoons against china teacups couldn't cover the fact that Hannah's face was grim and the silence of her younger companions was anxious.

"Come on in, Peter," said Donnenfeld. "You better hear this."

He helped himself to hot water and a couple of home-baked cookies and sat at the end of the couch. "You've reached some conclusions?"

Donnenfeld nodded. "I'm certain that this alien gunk is a genetically engineered

bacteria, and it was designed to do a whole lot more than simply make people choke and vomit. And there's something else we've learned about it. Once it's introduced into oil, it gallops through like a runaway herd of horses. It gets nourishment from the oil, and it reproduces as fast as anything I've ever seen."

"That means a little bit can go a long way," Peter said. "Yep. But I don't think the Visitors planned to hop from' tank to tank, poisoning our oil piecemeal. Whatever you want to say about Diana, she thinks bigger than that. I think her idea was to put this bacteria right into the ground."

It only took a second for the impact of Hannah's statement to sink in. Pete found his words slowly. "You mean poison our crude-oil reserves before we even pump the stuff out? My God, Hannah, the way you say it reproduces, there'd be nothing we could do to stop 'em once they started."

"Mm-hmm. That would fit in with that drilling platform they're building in the Persian Gulf. Just pour this stuff in. If this works the way it's supposed to, by drilling a few holes or taking over a few existing rigs around the world, they could ruin most of the oil on this planet."

"*They* don't need the oil," Neville whispered. "They've got other power we can't even fathom. But we'll *die* without oil, and Diana knows it."

Mitchell's face went pale. "Then we're dead."

Hannah glared at him. "What kind of talk is that?"

"Well, how can we possibly stop them?" said Mitchell, chin cradled in his pudgy hands.

The old lab director twitched her lips into that familiar impish half grin. "What the Visitors *don't* know about oil may stop them."

Pete's eyes narrowed. "You're up to something, aren't you?"

She ignored the accusation, her fingers steepling as she continued. "Their nasty little bacterium was developed with *refined* oil. I did a few experiments on my own and found out it doesn't do what it's supposed to do when it's mixed with *crude* oil."

Neville's jaw dropped. "What? How is that possible? The Visitors are so bloody advanced—"

"Yes, but they're far from perfect," Hannah said in a satisfied tone. "We call them aliens for a good reason. This world is our home, not theirs. They've been—ahem—*visiting* for a while now, but they've made a key mistake. It's pretty obvious their invasion's been directed by soldiers, not scientists."

"But Diana *is* a scientist," Neville pointed out.

"With a rather military frame of mind," Hannah countered.

"What makes you so sure?" asked Peter.

"Because they've been so busy conducting a military war they haven't taken the time to properly explore this planet. What they know about Earth they've picked up on the run, a little here and there as they've needed it. If we could sneak a peek at their *Encyclopedia Terra*, we'd probably find so many gaping holes in basic knowledge we'd fall down laughing."

"Which means?" Sari prompted.

"Which means I'd guess our lizard friends have never run across oil before, at least not like our petroleum. There's nothing in the rulebook about every world having the same geology. And in its current form, the Visitors' oil-chomping bacteria won't quite work in our crude. If it did work, it would be even worse in crude than in refined. It would be much more toxic. Downright deadly, in fact."

"How do you know that?" asked Neville.

"I had the computer reformulate it, then did a simulation.

The way it is now, it'll gum things up, but it won't be terribly lethal. Ah, but *my* way—that's another story. See, what the Visitors don't seem to know is that refined oil has certain unstable compounds added to it. Also has a different specific gravity than crude."

Pete scratched his head in confusion. "Lemme see if I've got this straight. A, the Visitors didn't know there was such a thing as crude oil *and* refined oil. B, they tailored this designer bacteria to work in refined oil. C, you think they really

want to use it on underground oil fields, which is crude, but they don't know there's a difference. And D, *you've* figured out a way to reformulate their bacteria so it works on crude even better than it already works on refined."

There was a long pause while Hannah waited to see if Forsythe was done. Then she nodded with finality. "Right." "Well, Hannah, if I were you, I'd sell 'em your formula. You'd be set for life," said Pete, deadpan.

Mitchell waved his hands. "Wait, wait, I've got a question. Why would they have developed the bacteria to work on refined oil?"

"Serendipity, son. Of course, I'm guessing, but they needed a sample to analyze, a starting point. I think they just happened to pick refined oil for that initial sample. From that, they drew up a performance profile, and from *that*, knowing how that sample behaved, they created the bacteria which'd have the desired effect."

Sari was troubled. "What if they turned around and tested their bacteria on crude?"

Hannah shrugged. "They'd eventually figure all this out, make the corrections on their formula for the bacteria, and cook up a new soup that was as deadly as they'd intended from the start. Their carelessness buys us some time."

Mitchell cackled softly to himself. "Hee, hee! We know something they don't know."

"Right," said Hannah, "and as long as that's the case, we're okay. But the moment they find out what we know, the countdown begins, and zero will most likely mean the destruction of Earth's oil resources—forever."

"Is, uh, is all this in the computer?" Neville asked.

"Bits and pieces," said Hannah. Then she tapped her head with her forefinger. "I've got me a good computer right up here. That's where I do most of my work—never leave home without it."

With a yawn and a stretch, Pete looked at his watch. "Well, you don't really need me anymore. Right, Hannah?"

“I suppose not, but you were quite a help today, Peter. Anytime you want to come here and work full-time . . .”

He leaned down and they traded pecks on the cheek; then he moved toward the door. Neville and Sari waved good-bye and finished their tea while sitting on the couch. Mitchell edged over to intercept Pete, then spoke in a low voice.

“Urn, Pete, can I talk to you?”

“Oh, Mitchell, I’m really in a hurry. I’m still wearing last month’s clothing here, I haven’t shaved in days, and I’ve got a dinner date with Lauren and her father. So unless it’s earthshaking stuff, I’d just as soon pass on it till tomorrow.” Pete didn’t really wait for a response. He patted the scientist’s round cheeks. “Good. Thanks to you, I can get home in time to take a shower so my friends won’t shun me.” He tipped his hand in salute and was gone before Mitchell could protest.

“What was that all about, Mitchell, old boy?” asked Neville with his most charming—and superior—smile.

“Nothing,” Mitchell mumbled. Then he left the lounge.

More clapped his hands together and rubbed them eagerly. “I think this calls for some sort of celebration.”

In unison, Sari and Hannah turned to stare at him. “Are you nuts?” Sari asked, disbelieving. “Finding out that the Visitors are on the verge of destroying our energy supplies is cause for celebration?”

He struck a pose. “All right, then, how about a farewell dinner?”

“Ho, ho, ho,” said Sari sarcastically.

Neville’s head inclined, a sheepish expression on his face. “All right. Actually, I’ve just been looking for an excuse to cook up a special dinner for all of you.”

“Don’t tell me you’re a gourmet chef on top of all your other talents,” said Hannah.

“Not gourmet, perhaps, but pretty bloody good, I think.”

“In all modesty,” Sari kidded.

“Well, Neville, we don’t have a huge variety of eatables here, you know,” Hannah warned.

“Ah, my dear Dr. Donnenfeld, I have a confession. I’ve already checked your stores and you’ve got everything I need. So, what say I don the chef’s cap for the evening? Hm?” Hannah waved a hand in casual approval. “Who am I to object? I can barely boil an egg m’self.”

True to his word, the Englishman created a simple but elegant meal, served on the conference tables in the underground lounge area—chicken in wine sauce, rice, and fresh vegetables.

After she had finished, Donnenfeld pushed back from the table, dabbed her lips with her napkin, and raised her wineglass toward Neville. “That was the best meal I’ve had in ages, Mr. More. A toast to you and your culinary magic.” The dozen staff members joined her salute.

“Well, thanks, Hannah. It’s always a pleasure to see happy faces and chewing mouths.”

“Don’t forget expanding waistlines,” Sari added.

Neville wagged an admonishing finger. “Tut-tut, Sari. This was a high-fiber, low-fat meal. Very healthy, I assure you.” “Wherever did you learn to cook like this?” asked Hannah. Leaning back in his seat, Neville smiled in fond reminiscence. “Back in my Oxford days. I shared this amazingly cramped flat with two other blokes. Up to then, the extent of my kitchen forays encompassed frying a hamburger and opening cans. You might say I was a culinary illiterate.” Hannah snorted. “And you went from that to *this*? How?” “Well, I wasn’t paying much attention to my schoolwork, and I met this girl. Damned good cook herself. But she maintained that any man who wasn’t a professional chef was quite simply incapable of learning to cook anything not out of a package.”

“You learned this”—Hannah gestured at the meal’s remains—“just because of a challenge?”

“At the risk of sounding immodest,” Neville went on, “I’ve always believed I can learn any skill, conquer any obstacle.

dominate any field I cared to take on. I think any intelligent person can do the same.”

Mitchell leaned both elbows on the table, licking his fingers after putting down a denuded chicken bone. “Just for personal satisfaction?”

“Oh, no, no, Mitchell. I envy people who don’t need any more motivation than that. But I’m not one of them. I’m a gambler at heart. The stakes have got to interest me.” Mitchell nodded. “And what were the stakes in your cooking challenge?”

Neville arched one eyebrow. “Ahh, Mitchell. So bright, yet so naive. This young lady who figuratively slapped my face with her glove and dared me to the duel was—how shall I put it, at least somewhat delicately?—rather fetching. And not the least bit forthcoming. So we made a bet. If I could create a meal that would bedazzle her taste buds, she’d agree to a night of . . . er . . . other pleasures.” He smiled seductively, his tantalizing blue eyes focused on Sari. “I won the bet. Neither of us was disappointed.”

She met his gaze, and he broke off first, looking around at the rest of the dinner company. “I, uh, I hope I didn’t offend anybody with that little tale of decadence.”

Hannah’s half smile reappeared. “The things some folks will do for a good meal. What other sorts of gambling do you dabble in, Neville?”

He straightened stiffly, the humor draining from his lips. The smile lingered, but it was cold as chilled steel. “When I gamble, I don’t dabble, Hannah. I take my games seriously. That’s why I usually win.”

“How ’bout a for instance?” the old woman insisted, her eyes probing his.

His tone and expression made it clear that More considered *this* to be a challenge. He accepted. “When I started my second company, we had cash-flow problems, as often happens. The whole business and computer world was watching me, waiting for me to fail. Hoping I’d fail, so they could laugh out loud and be secure in the knowledge that my first company had truly been a fluke, that I was incapable of sustained success. Do you know what it’s like when both the business pages *and* the gossip columnists relish in calling you a selfdestructive flash-in-the-pan? I do. It’s not jolly-good fun. But there I was, in

dire need of money to make my payroll. I had some of the best software people in the world with me. They were mavericks like me, and I lured them in because *they* couldn't turn down a challenge either. But if I stumbled badly enough, they'd pack up and leave faster than quicksilver." Neville paused for effect, certain his listeners were being lured in, too. "So I flew to Las Vegas. I needed twenty grand to keep afloat." He stopped again, taking a calm breath. "I won forty. The rest, as they say, is history."

Now he smiled broadly, pleased to be in command of the gathering. "Dessert, anyone?" he asked brightly.

"Why me, Neville?" Sari said, her voice soft in the dim light that floated through the window of the boat shed. The two of them were nestled in their beachfront hideaway, inside a cocoon of blankets and chaise mattresses. Only their heads and bare shoulders were uncovered.

"You were something of a challenge."

She laughed. "Me? I was awed when I met you." "Well, it was a challenge to overcome that, to get you to see me as just a human being. Challenges pop up in some of the most unexpected places from time to time. Don't you find that?"

"Mmm. I guess so." Sari's jaw clenched as a shiver rippled along her skin. "Brrr! I think it may be getting too cold for this, babe. I just turned into one giant goose bump."

"I can attest to the fact that your toes and fingers *are* a tad on the chilly side."

"Hey," Sari chided, "it's your job to warm me uhhhhhh—" Her sentence trailed off into a lengthy yawn. "Up," she finally said.

"Sleepy?" Neville asked, cradling her head on his shoulder. "Mmmm," she purred. "You usually have the opposite effect on me."

"Perhaps it's the long day everybody put in."

Sari yawned again. Her tongue felt thick and fuzzy as she spoke. "Or maybe it was too much wine at dinner. Wine on top of the wine sauce you served with that chicken. By the way, my compliments to the chef. Hey, here's one: you're pretty cute, cheffy."

Neville propped her up against the rough wooden wall. “I think it’s past your bedtime. What say we get you dressed and tucked in, hm?”

She found it increasingly difficult to keep her eyes open. “I . . . think maybe you’re right, Nevvy.” Then she giggled. “I never called you that before. Should I?”

“Not really,” he said as he pulled her sweater down over her head and helped her push her limp arms into the sleeves.

“Will you actually tuck me in, Neville?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t trust another living soul to do it. ” He burrowed down under the blankets.

Sari’s eyes opened wide. “Talk about icy fingers! What’re you *doing* down there?”

“Looking for your underthings and blue jeans,” he said, voice muffled by the covers.

“Oh. Well, if you find them, you c’n keep ’em.” Sari knew her words were slurring toward sleep. The way she felt, like a rag doll in need of added stuffing, sleep would be just fine with her. . . .

If sunlight could take on substance and sound, the morning brightness streaming through the window of Sari’s cottage would have been made of steel-bladed daggers stabbing her eyes to the accompaniment of heavy-metal rock played at full volume.

She tried shutting her eyes, only to find the light was invading her senses through eyelids already tightly closed. “Oh, God, why didn’t I pull the damn window shade down last night,” she moaned. Slowly certain realizations sidled back into her brain. Among them, the inability to recall going to sleep at all last night. The last thing lodged in her bleary memory was making love with Neville in the cold confines and warm blankets of the boathouse.

“Neville must’ve put me to bed,” she said out loud. She felt vaguely insulted that he hadn’t bothered to stay, even if she’d been totally zonked on wine. “Ohhh, that wine . . .” She gingerly clutched her head with both hands, as if making sure

it was indeed still there. “It’s there, but I’m not sure what’s left inside it. Geez, what *was* that wine anyway, nine hundred proof?”

Rolling carefully, afraid to find that her center of equilibrium was nonfunctional, Sari brought herself to a sitting position. Not particularly steady, but no longer horizontal. “Gotta get dressed. ...”

But she was dressed—still wearing yesterday’s sweater and jeans. Panties were on, but no bra. Neville must have dressed her before carting her back to the cottage, but he hadn’t been *that* conscientious. “Besides, men may be bom knowing how to remove a woman’s bra, but try and find one who can stuff you back into the thing—hah!” It occurred to her that wool sweaters and no bra were not a comfortable combination. She reached under the sweater for a quick scratch.

“Oh, hell. ...” With a deft move—considering her condition—she slipped the sweater over her head, found a cotton oxford shirt draped over an adjacent chair, and put that on instead. “Much better,” she said, tucking it in. Then she got to her feet, swaying for a moment before stabilizing. “Not too bad. I’ve been worse, though I mercifully don’t recall the details of *those* mornings. Well, I think I should quit talking to myself and find someone else to talk to.”

Her watch was still on her wrist and she looked at it. “Whoa! Ten o’clock! Everybody’s gonna think I’m a decadent slut.”

She decided she was sound enough to hurry, and she left her room quickly.

Each small house contained four private bedrooms, and although all work was done in the underground complex, Donnenfeld had decided those who wanted less cramped sleeping quarters would be allowed to return to the cottages. Sari stood in the center hallway for a moment—the other rooms had their doors closed. Empty, or occupied by other decadent people? She knocked lightly. No answer.

She left the cottage for the lab facilities down below. When she descended the stairs and pushed open the heavy metal doors, she was surprised to see only a few of her colleagues at work. Mitchell darted out of Hannah Donnenfeld’s office, head down, and bumped solidly into Sari.

“Oh! Sorry,” he murmured, blushing in embarrassment. “Forget it,” she said,

flexing the toe he'd stepped on. "Is Hannah mad because I overslept?"

"I don't know—she's not down here."

"She's not? She's usually the first one at work." Mitchell's voice betrayed his concern. "I thought maybe she was out jogging with you."

Sari snorted "I'm in no condition to jog. So if she went out, it wasn't with me. I just woke up."

"You look it. In fact, you look like something the cat dragged in."

She arched her eyebrows ruefully. "More like Neville dragged me in. Is he down here?"

Mitchell shook his head. "Haven't seen him either. But, then, I wasn't looking."

"You seem wide awake, Mitch. Didn't you have any of that wine last night?"

"A little. You know I don't drink much. Good thing I didn't have more. The stuff really went right to my head." "Yeah? Me, too. And I usually hold it pretty well." Mitchell lowered his chin. "I, uh, slept a little late, too," he said into his shirt collar.

"Hm. Maybe the wine got to Hannah, too, though she can usually drink like a sailor on shore leave. Let's go see if she's still asleep."

They turned and rushed back up to ground level, then out the storage shed that sheltered the secret entryway to the lab complex, and across the compound to Donnenfeld's cabin. Sari tried to roughly push away a thought that haunted her from time to time. She loved Hannah as a friend, as a sister, even as a mother figure. But Hannah Donnenfeld was more than seventy, and no one could know better than a biologist that old people eventually die. Over the years, generally for no reason, Sari had had a recurring nightmare—finding her mentor had passed away in her sleep. Could this be the morning that nightmare would become real?

The door was unlocked. Sari's hand rested on the knob for a second. Mitchell sensed her hesitation. "Open it, Sari." With a deep breath, she did. The bedroom was empty, the bedding askew, pillow on the floor, sheets hanging half off, as if

they'd been pulled by a clenched hand. *Hannah's hand?*

Without a word, Sari spun and led the way to the cottage assigned to More during his stay. They were running now, hearts pounding. Sari wrenched the door open. The bed was made—it hadn't been slept in. Mitchell sagged against the doorway; Sari slumped down onto the edge of the bed.

"Go ahead—say it, Mitch."

"Say what?"

She glared at him, but tears were forming in her reddened eyes. "That Neville More kidnapped her." Her voice was ragged.

"We don't know that."

"We can make a pretty goddamned good guess." Mitchell fell silent, looking away. After a long moment, he said, "We better call Pete Forsythe. Then we better turn this place upside down for clues." He gulped. "Then we better pray, because this means that you and I are the senior staff members and we're in charge of Brook Cove Lab—unless we get Hannah back."

"*Until,*" Sari said savagely. She bolted from the cabin. Mitchell trotted after her.

Chapter 11

Pete's sleek Mercedes skidded slightly as it churned up Brook Cove's long dirt-and-gravel driveway, a plume of dust fanning out behind the car. He had the door open and was clambering out before he'd even shut the ignition off. Sari and Mitchell ran to meet him. Panicked half sentences spilled out of both of them at the same time, overlapping to form a barely comprehensible mosaic of what had happened. On the rapid walk back to the cottages and then down to the lab, Pete managed to extract the major details.

"Well?" Mitchell demanded, standing over the seated Forsythe with his chubby arms crossing and uncrossing impatiently.

Pete shrugged. "Well what?"

"Do you think More kidnapped her?"

"For lack of any other plausible theory, yes, I do. But as for where he took her and why, I—I don't have any idea." Mitchell spun away and began to pace, his hands pushed down into the pockets of his baggy jeans. "I've got an idea."

"Yeah?" said Sari. "What?"

"I think Neville is working for the Visitors, and I'd bet Hannah's on a lizard Mother Ship right now."

Sari's hands went to her hips and her voice grew annoyed and defensive. "Oh, Mitchell, gimme a break. Why would Neville be working for the Visitors?"

"I was hoping you might know. I mean, nobody here knows him better than you do, Sari. Certainly not in the biblical sense," he said bitterly.

She whirled on him, her freckled nose wrinkled in pained anger. Before Mitchell could move or Pete could step in between, she lashed out with a solid punch to Mitchell's chest. The blow made him stagger back a couple of steps. Sari's right arm cocked for a roundhouse follow-up and halted only when Pete clamped a firm grip on her wrist, squeezing just tightly enough to make her wince.

“Ow! Let go of me!” She tried to wrench loose, but Pete wouldn’t release her.

“Knock it off, both of you.” Gently, Pete lowered Sari’s arm to her side and let it go. “Okay, I know why Sari feels guilty. I feel guilty myself. Maybe if I’d’ve stayed last night, this wouldn’t have happened. Why do *you* feel guilty, Mitchell?” “Me? I don’t feel guilty. ...”

“The hell you don’t. You wouldn’t have said what you said to Sari if you didn’t feel partly responsible yourself.” “Okay, okay! I feel guilty, but I have a good reason for being pissed at Sari.”

“Oh, geez,” she said sourly. “This I gotta hear.”

“I told you—I told all of you—that I didn’t trust Neville. Pete was the only one who agreed with me at all. The rest of you—you women—made me feel like the only reason I didn’t like him was because I was jealous of him. Neville More, the handsome, charming computer genius, versus Mitchell Loomis, the *szhlubb*.”

Pete made a cautionary face. “Mitchell, calm down. What the hell are you talking about?”

“I didn’t care what everybody else said. That *wasn’t* why I didn’t trust him. So I started checking into his story. I wanted to know if he’s really been going around helping computer installations fight the Visitors.”

Sari stamped her foot. “Would you *please* get to the point?” “Don’t rush me,” he snapped.

“*Hannah’s life is at stake!*” Sari screamed.

Pete pushed them apart again. “Mitchell, just talk. We can all clobber each other with baseball bats *after* we get Hannah back safe and sound. Did you find out anything about More?”

“Yeah, as a matter of fact, I did. I called three of the places I remember he said he’d stopped at. Two confirmed that he did help them clear up their computers and get their operations geared toward fighting the Visitors.”

“Gee, that sure is incriminating,” said Sari mockingly. “Not so fast. The third place said things got totally screwed up within a week after your friend Neville

left.”

Pete jumped in, hoping to head off another salvo from Sari. “Are they sure More was the cause of their problems?” “They said that thought hadn’t even occurred to them until I mentioned it. But now they can’t come up with any other reason for their computer system to go totally haywire.” Now it was Pete’s turn to pace. “Dammit, Mitchell. Why didn’t you tell this to somebody as soon as you knew?” “That was yesterday, and I did try. I tried to tell you before you left. But you were in such a big hurry.”

Sari’s eyes flashed angrily. “Hey, that’s not fair! Did you tell Pete *why* you wanted to talk to him, what was so goddamned important?”

“Well, no, but—”

“But nothing,” she countered. “What’re we supposed to do, read your fatheaded mind?”

“Oh, so now she’s making fat jokes,” Mitchell growled to the ceiling. “Very useful, considering—”

“About as useful as you keeping everything to yourself instead of—”

“*HOLD IT!*” Pete shouted, so loudly he surprised even himself, the sound bouncing harshly off the walls of the small office. “This isn’t getting us anywhere. Are *your* computers okay?”

“Well, they worked fine last night when we quit for dinner,” said Mitchell.

“Never mind last night. What about this morning?”

Sari shrugged. “We both got up late. Neither of us has used ’em today.”

“Then let’s see if More left us any calling cards,” said Pete. Mitchell led the way to the main computer room, where two younger scientists were huddled around the central terminal.

They parted when they heard Mitchell order, “Let us through.”

“It’s all yours, Mitchell,” said Donna, a short black woman with a compact Afro

hairstyle. “But you may have a few problems.”

Mitchell froze, fingers touching the keyboard. “What do you mean, a few problems?”

“Kenny noticed it first,” Donna said, nodding at her coworker, a youthful Japanese fellow with a mop of straight black hair falling across his eyes.

“What was it doing?” Sari asked.

“More like what it wasn’t doing,” said Kenny, lips tight in frustration. “It wasn’t doing much of anything.”

“Oh, God, noooo!” Mitchell wailed, frantically pecking at the keys. “Oh, please, no ... no ... no. ...”

“No *what*?” Pete wanted to know, but Mitchell’s attention was riveted to the computer screen.

Pete hadn’t had too much experience with computers, but he knew enough to recognize that something was seriously wrong with this one. Letters and numbers galloped across the CRT like single-file herds of horses that refused to be corralled into making sense.

The faces of the Brook Cove scientists confirmed for him that the situation was as bad as he suspected. For five minutes Mitchell’s fingers flew over the keys without letup. The only noises he made were an occasional grunt of effort and pitiful mewings that sounded entirely inappropriate coming from someone of Mitchell’s bulk.

Finally, without warning, he sank into the chair at the work station and covered his face with both hands. Preceding animosity forgotten now, Sari touched his shoulder lightly. “Mitch? What is it? You lost me.”

A strangled sound escaped from Mitchell’s throat.

“Mitchell, tell us,” Peter urged.

With a sluggishness born of shock, Mitchell turned to the others. “That bastard planted a virus.”

Pete looked from face to face, seeking a clue. “A virus? I don’t get it.”

Through gritted teeth, Mitchell continued. “It’s . . . it’s a tiny program inserted into a computer system. The programmer who puts it in can set it to be triggered whenever he wants it to go off. Then it replicates itself and spreads all through the computer’s body, so to speak. Just like a virus in a living body. Only in a computer it waltzes along, merrily erasing and garbling memories. It spreads a kind of rapidly creeping paralysis. And since computer systems are sometimes linked automatically to other systems, the virus can spread that way, too.”

Pete considered the ramifications. “More must’ve been doing this same thing everyplace he supposedly stopped to help. That means some of those viruses have been out there for weeks. Is there any way to stop them from spreading?”

Kenny spoke up. “I did a paper on systems security for my master’s. Sometimes you can stop it—if you catch it early enough. Since the sabotage is a little like a timed-release cold capsule, if you can find it before it springs out of its hiding place, you can head off the damage. If you’re too late for that, maybe you can get lucky and cut off from interlocking systems before it spreads. But if we’re too late *altogether*, More’s viruses could wind up knocking out every major science and defense computer system in the country—maybe even the world,”

“Okay,” Pete said, his mind racing as it simultaneously tried to sort this new knowledge and think up a course of action. “Kenny, you seem to know a lot about this virus thing. Mitchell, give him the list of all the places we know Neville More worked at. Kenny, call ’em all up and tell them to do whatever they have to do, whatever they *can* do to fight the virus and stop any more infections. Tell ’em to spread the word to every computer system they know of to search for a hidden virus immediately.”

Mitchell reached into his shirt pocket and numbly handed a sheet of paper to Kenny, who grabbed it and ran out to make those critical calls.

“I don’t get it,” Sari whispered. “Why would Neville do this?” Then she pounded a fist on the desk top. “*Shit*—I can’t believe I misjudged him like that. I feel like such a dumb jackass.”

Pete draped a reassuring hand around her neck. “Hey, Sari, we all do right about now. We all had chances to ask questions. We all saw two and two add up to five and ignored it.” “Well, we’re in great shape,” Sari said with a short, bitter laugh.

“Hannah’s been kidnapped, Neville’s killed our computer, the Visitors are about to poison the world’s oil supplies, and we can’t stop them. And all because we ate that goddamned chicken dinner last night. Every drop of wine and wine sauce must have been spiked, except what our illustrious chef had for himself. All I want to know is, *why did he do it?*”

Pete sighed. “I have a clue, I think. I did check into his background right after I met him. Denise Daltrey did some digging through the CBS News files. We found out something that wasn’t widely known. Remember the company he started a few years ago, after his first company failed? Well, the second one evidently went belly-up not two days before the Visitors reinvaded.”

Sari shook her head. “So what? What would that have to do with his collaborating with the lizards?”

Mitchell cleared his throat. “I may know.”

Peter and Sari looked at him. He took a breath, then continued, “People I talked to at the other places he worked before he came here, some of them knew him pretty well. Seems he was working on a real big deal just before the second company went bankrupt. Word spread, and More decided to cash in on the interest by selling stock. First time he did that. And he made a mint. But then the deal fell apart, the stock price plummeted, loans came due—everything went sour at the same time.”

“Did anyone know what the secret deal was?” asked Pete. “Yeah—some super new software and chips for the Pentagon. More supposedly solved some of the big problems with the Star Wars antimissile system.”

“But that’s all been experimental,” said Pete.

“Yeah, well, More sold the Pentagon on some bag of tricks that *he* said would make the system a reality.”

“What happened?” Sari asked.

“It was supposed to be a long-term-development contract— would’ve made Neville a billionaire in time. But he lied. Not only did he steal other people’s ideas and claim them as his own; at the last second some of those people spoke up and told the Pentagon that the stolen ideas didn’t really work anyway. More

screamed he was innocent. And he swore he was set up by industry people who hated him and were jealous of the fact that he was a genius and they were just stupid peons.”

Sari bit a fingernail nervously. “Wow. All this was to get back at the guys he thinks ruined him.”

“Yeah,” Pete said, “and he may do in the whole planet in the bargain.”

“What do you think he’s getting from the Visitors?” asked Mitchell.

“Who knows,” said Pete. “Doesn’t really matter. What does matter is that Neville found out that Hannah can give the Visitors the info they need to make this oil poison of theirs work. Somehow we’ve got to get her back before they ...” There was no need to complete the sentence. Three minds conjured up similar horrific images of Hannah Donnenfeld being tortured aboard Diana’s starship. The bleakness of the situation required no verbalization.

“How do we get her back?” Mitchell asked simply.

Pete took a very deep breath, held it, then blew it out in a slow puff. “I don’t have the slightest idea.”

Chapter 12

The first thing Peter did was call President William Brent Morrow to apprise him of the latest developments. The ad hoc network of government agents spread across the country would aid in warning science and defense establishments that their computer systems were in grave danger. In addition, bulletins were circulated to both police and public, asking for help in apprehending Neville More and finding Hannah Donnenfeld.

But Morrow couldn't disagree with Forsythe's conclusion that Hannah was more than likely in Diana's clutches by now. A check of defense surveillance records revealed that a Visitor skyfighter did penetrate New York airspace at about the time More must have been spiriting Hannah off the Brook Cove premises. But the intruder had slipped in and out so rapidly that there'd been no chance to try to intercept it. To all concerned, that pretty much cemented Donnenfeld's immediate fate. Morrow promised to contact Mike Donovan and Julie Parrish with the Los Angeles resistance and enlist their help, too.

Pete had worked with the West Coast group more than once. In fact, both Julie and Donovan had visited New York. Since Diana's starship was generally stationed over Los Angeles, Donovan and Parrish had more experience in dealing with Diana than all the other resistance cadres combined. They sent word back via the President that they'd turn over every rock and pursue every tenuous fifth-column link for news of Hannah and for a way to secure her release.

leading Morrow and his advisers to conclude that the drilling platform off the Saudi Arabian coast was some sort of test to determine if the strategy was indeed feasible.

That being the case, and with Donnenfeld in Visitor custody, Morrow had to make a grave decision. First, he had to assume that the Visitors *would* get the data they wanted from Donnenfeld. Once they did, they would be able to bring their oil-destroying bacteria up to full and deadly strength in short order. And the moment it was, it would be injected into the Persian Gulf's giant undersea oil field. If that worked, Diana would surely do the same thing around the globe.

Morrow could hope that the California resistance platoon would somehow free Donnenfeld before Diana could shatter that starchy New England resolve. But even in the best of times, hopes were rarely sufficient as foundations for critical policies. Today's world was no Dickensian dichotomy—these were simply the *worst of times*, and they demanded quick, concrete action: air strikes on the Visitors' Persian Gulf platform before Diana had a chance to make use of it.

Using scrambled phones, President Morrow called the Prime Minister of Israel. Avram Herzog was very different from “Wild Bill” Morrow, slight in stature, urbane, with a short graying beard, but he was a no-nonsense leader and Morrow liked that, feeling they could always speak frankly without resorting to the time-wasting amenities diplomats loved so much.

From his uncluttered Jerusalem office, Herzog told Morrow there had been no additional activity in the Gulf. “They put that one platform in, seemed to finish it, and that's that, Bill.” “How closely are your people watching it?”

“We've got three agents—one of ours, a Saudi, and an Egyptian. Their instructions are not to take their eyes off it.” Morrow chuckled. “Who'd've thought your people and the Arabs ever woulda been looking through the same binocs at a common enemy, Avram?”

“Global disasters make strange bedfellows,” said Herzog dryly.

“Amen to that. Anyhow, you're the expert on what you can and can't do in that region. In view of these latest circumstances, what do you think of short-circuiting that drilling rig before the lizards try to use it?”

Herzog waggled his dark brows. “I was wondering when you'd get around to that. I don't think we've got any choice. We have to try something.”

“It's risky. They've got to be expecting some kinda move. In fact, they're probably surprised we haven't done anything up till now. What shape is your air force in?”

“Pretty good,” said the Israeli. “We were rather ferocious at the outset. With a fair amount of sacrifice of good men, we managed to save most of the air force.”

“You could lose more than a few men on this mission.” “You don't have to tell an Israeli about the dangers of war, my friend.”

Within the hour a squad of ten K'fir and F-16 jet fighters screamed into the air, bearing the blue-and-white Star of David into battle one more time. But this time it wasn't only their tiny homeland for which they entered combat. The fortunes of the entire resistance, and the fate of the world might turn on this sortie.

The suspicion shared by Morrow and Herzog, that the Visitors had long been expecting an attack, proved to be an understatement. Even before the Israeli planes were within visual range of the drilling rig, a phalanx of skyfighters met them with lasers blazing.

From their observation post near the coastal dunes, the wiry Jewish agent Lavi Mayer, Abdul ibn Aziz, the bearded Saudi, and their dark-skinned Egyptian comrade, Gamel Nefti, watched the mismatch. A pair of Israeli jets took direct hits and instantly exploded into churning fireballs. A third fighter lost a wing and spun toward the shallow Gulf waters, trailing the black oily smoke of death. It blew up on impact.

The remaining seven planes crisscrossed the sky in a cunning pattern of aerobatics, hoping to confuse the Visitor pilots enough to make up for the alien vessels' superior firepower and create an opening for shooting a couple of air-to-ground missiles at the drilling platform.

"Hey, look!" Lavi shouted, his finger tracking one jet that ducked impossibly under the Visitor defenders. Two other planes tried to provide covering cannon fire as the lone fighter dove to ground-hugging altitude.

Abdul pumped one fist into the air with short, powerful strokes, urging the plane toward its target. Gamel simply stared, then uttered a short prayer ending with "Allah protect you. ..."

At his last word a laser bolt flashed from a pursuing skyfighter and sliced into the K'fir jet at midfuselage. Two explosions shredded the plane into three distinct parts, and they fell into the Gulf with grotesque clumsiness, like graceful birds shot in mid-flight and tumbling to the ground.

The remaining six jets kicked in their afterburners and fled the combat zone with astonishing speed. Lavi's entire body sagged, and his two companions physically held him up for a moment until they were sure he had the strength to stand after witnessing the stunning defeat.

“I’m . . . I’m okay,” he mumbled.

“Are you sure?” asked Gamel.

Abdul spoke softly. “You Israelis aren’t used to losing.”

Lavi shrugged. “I guess not. This was a big one to lose.”

“We haven’t lost yet,” Gamel said, his square jaw jutting out in determination.

“Well, if we intend to win, this was a strange way to start,” said Lavi.

Hannah Donnenfeld opened her eyes, took a quick glance around, then shut them again. She counted to three, though she knew the gesture was futile, then took another peek. The only familiar sight in the dim illumination was Neville More, sitting in a chair across the narrow room. Hannah found herself reclined on a firm sleeping pallet, and she sat up for a better view of her surroundings. The walls were generally featureless, except for some sort of electronic-security control panel near the doorway.

“How are you feeling, Dr. Donnenfeld?”

She pursed her lips. “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

“Ah, yes—*The Wizard of Oi*. I see your sense of humor is intact,” said Neville, offering a reassuring smile.

“I’d be just as happy if I never saw that grin of yours again, Neville.”

He spread his hands in an approximation of apology. “Yes, well, I suppose I can understand that.”

“Presumably, I’m in Diana’s Mother Ship?”

“Good guess.”

“If I’m being charged for the room,” she said with a disdainful wave, “tell them the accommodations stink.” “I’m afraid there’s not much we can do about that —” “Booked solid, are they?”

“And as for the fee, Diana does plan to exact some payment for her hospitality.”

Getting to her feet, Donnenfeld realized she was still dressed in her favorite flannel nightgown and plaid robe. “I hope she doesn’t mind my informal attire.”

“Couldn’t be helped, Dr. Donnenfeld. We had to leave Brook Cove in a bit of a hurry.” He watched her circle the room, examining the ceiling vents, the security panel at the door, the seams in the walls.

“First time I’ve been in one of these ships,” she explained. “I do hope I can get the grand tour.”

“Somehow I don’t think Diana will be able to grant that wish.”

She turned slowly, fixing him with a stem, unwavering gaze. “Just one question, Neville. Why?”

He leaned back casually. “Oh, I’m being very well paid by the Visitors.”

“I don’t think you’re doing this just for money. Not your style, son.”

“I’ve become extremely important to them. Downright indispensable, in fact. I’ve done the bulk of the computer setup on this oil project. *They* recognize my genius, even if my so-called colleagues never did.”

“How did a genius miss the mix-up between crude oil and refined?”

He wagged a finger at her. “Ah, not my fault. Diana has this disruptive habit of keeping certain things to herself. One of her great weaknesses, but then, no one’s perfect, eh? Had I had the complete access to data and plans that I’d asked for, that little oversight wouldn’t have occurred, I’d wager.”

“You planning to tell her that? How does she take to being shown the error of her ways? Not well, from what I hear.” “Perhaps, perhaps. But our relationship is somewhat different. I’m not one of her sycophantic toadies. I regard myself as an outside consultant. More equals than anything else.” Hannah nodded. “Of course. After all, you’re not one of her officers. Not yet, at any rate. Do they commission humans into their ranks?”

“I’m not one of them, Doctor,” he said, glaring.

Her mouth curled into a half smile. “Little sensitive, are we? Neville, none of us

gets the recognition we think we deserve in our heart of hearts. We all get slighted, all have to put up with the Philistines who don't appreciate us. That's just the way it is. Do you expect me to believe you can't handle it?"

He stood suddenly, looming over her, his English reserve blasted away by cold rage. "There's a bloody big difference between the odd slight and a calculated, invidious plot hatched by jealous, small-minded worms," he snarled. "And you're the last one to downgrade the value of recognition by one's peers, you with your Nobel Prize and your honorary degrees." Hannah sat calmly on the edge of the bed, keeping her eyes locked with More's. "I'd be doing the same things regardless of any prizes I might have been lucky enough to win." "Yes, well, we're not all saints," he ridiculed. "Some of us crave a tad more than inner satisfaction. And I don't want any holier-than-thou pity. Got a bellyful of that after my first company folded. Even then, people were just waiting in line to stab me in the back, kill my career. And when they thought they'd done it, you know what they did? They didn't even have the honest decency to kick me while I was down. *That* I could've understood. Instead, they stood over me like I was a corpse at a wake. 'Oh, poor Neville, such a bright lad, too bad he's got this fatal flaw of thinking he's better than the rest of us.' Well, I've got a clue for those bastards—for all of you. I *am* better."

Before Donnenfeld could counter his tirade, the door slid open. Diana and two guards entered, accompanied by Lydia. The commander extended a hand in greeting, then withdrew it when Hannah met it with icy indifference. "Dr. Donnenfeld, I've waited a long time for this."

While Diana spoke, Lydia tapped a code into the security panel just inside the door. Hannah was startled to see the wall behind her part in the middle, revealing what had to be one of Diana's high-tech torture chambers—a straight-backed seat with restraint clasps for arms and feet, and a metallic ring that could lower to fit around the victim's head. A free-standing control console was placed to one side.

"As a fellow scientist," Diana continued, "I admire you a great deal. I realize you may find that hard to imagine, but it's true."

"Thanks," Donnenfeld said simply.

"That's why the thought of having to torture you displeases me. Neville has told

me that you've brilliantly analyzed the flaw in my plan. All this unpleasantness might have been avoided but for an error Neville made. " Her features tightened as she turned to the Englishman. "Did you remove the information on Dr. Donnenfeld's solution from the Brook Cove computers before you left?"

"You know the answer to that, Diana," he shot back. "The answer is no," she said to Donnenfeld. "Because he inserted a virus into your computer system to sabotage it— *before* removing the data I wanted."

"Don't go blaming poor Neville." Hannah was amused. "I don't put much stock in computers as a substitute for old-fashioned thoughtfulness. The computers didn't contain much that would've helped you, Diana."

"I told her that," said Neville amiably, "but she didn't believe me. You're such a doubting Thomas, Diana. It'll be your downfall some day. Dr. Donnenfeld is no ordinary scientist. "

The Visitor commander flashed a warning glare at him. "Dr. Donnenfeld, the knowledge you carry in your brain is something I need. I'll get it, with or without your cooperation. *With* your cooperation, this process will be much easier for me and considerably less painful for you."

Donnenfeld puckered her lips and made a rude noise. Diana's glowering reaction delighted her no end.

The guards in the starship corridor stepped aside and saluted as the door behind them snapped open with a hiss. Diana stormed past them and disappeared around the curving bulkhead. A moment later Neville and Lydia came out of the interrogation cell. The door shut behind them.

"We have to talk to her," said the Englishman.

Lydia laughed ironically. "Oh *no* we don't. The last thing Diana wants right now is for me to tell her she's wrong." "Well, somebody's got to tell her."

"Be my guest." Lydia pivoted, flipping her blond mane over one shoulder, and walked away. "Keep the prisoner under visual surveillance. Report any unusual activity to me," she called back to the guards.

Neville fortified his resolve and strode off, then stopped and sidled back toward

the guards. “Er, which way to Diana’s quarters?”

The guards traded insolent glances. “Idiot human,” one whispered. Then, turning to Neville: “I’ll escort you.” “Uh, thanks, mate.”

“Rather presumptuous of you to come here, Neville,” said Diana after the helpful guard had deposited More at her cabin hatch, then scuttled away.

More helped himself to a low-slung lounge chair. “Not at all. You’ve got an incredible scientific resource in that cell, and it’s my duty to stop you before you destroy it with your heavy-handed torture techniques.”

“We questioned her for two hours. When she answered at all, she was vulgar, flippant or both.”

“What did you expect?”

“I expect nothing—I demand information. And I’ll get it any way I can.”

“You won’t get it by killing her. You heard Lydia’s report. Hannah Donnenfeld is old, and she has a heart ailment. She’s also stubborn and stiff-necked, and the power intensity you’d need to break her resistance will surely kill her. And then you’ll have nothing.”

“She’ll talk before she’ll die.”

“Don’t underestimate her like you do other humans. She’s not afraid to die, Diana.”

“Maybe I overestimated *you*, Neville.”

“Look, Diana, I’m not one of your officers. You can’t simply shut me up with a word.”

She stood suddenly, her anger flaring. “I can have you *killed* with a word, human. You’d do well to remember that fact of life. I thought you were reliable in addition to being brilliant. Now I see the familiar colors of a disloyal coward instead of a trusted ally.”

Moving close to him, her voice lowered to a harsh whisper. “You continue to live

at my whim, Mr. More. My ship is not a democracy. You have no vote in my decisions. If you disagree, keep it to yourself. If you cross me”—she paused for chilling effect—“I may lose my temper. And if I lose my temper, *you* could lose your life. Now get out.”

He flinched as she spun imperiously. She touched a button on her desk panel and the cabin hatch opened. He took the cue and left.

Lydia already had Donnenfeld in the interrogation apparatus when Diana entered the chamber.

“Is everything ready? We’ve got no time to waste,” she said, an impatient edge in her tone.

Lydia nodded, then pointed to a gray-haired male officer with olive skin and a medical corps armband. “This is Stavros. He was just recently transferred from the Mother Ship over the central Mediterranean. Fortunately, he’s an expert on human physiology.”

Diana gave him a measuring look. “Doctor, have you looked at this human’s status chart?”

He nodded deferentially. “Yes, Commander. Suffering from atherosclerosis typical of her age. Also, some scar damage to the heart muscle itself, indicative of a myocardial infarction. And a valve has been replaced. In my opinion, there is a seventy percent probability she will die during standard interrogation procedures. ’ ’

“Your opinion was not solicited, Doctor.”

“You have yourself a problem, from what I gather. Eh, Diana?” said Donnenfeld tauntingly. “I die, this information dies with me.”

Diana laughed shortly. “You exaggerate your importance, Doctor. My scientists are working on the solution to the problem you so generously discovered for us. I have complete confidence they’ll solve it very soon. If you share your data with us, so much the better. But even if you don’t, this project will move forward.”

Lydia took her commander aside. “Diana, at least begin at low power. Stavros

says her survival is much more likely if we have a little patience. And you and I both know our scientists aren't anywhere near a solution."

"Patience doesn't save time, Lydia dear."

"But it often wins wars, Diana—*dear*."

"Teatime's just not the same without Hannah," Mitchell said, his face a melancholy mask. Pete, Lauren Stewart, Sari, and Donna, one of the young computer experts, were with him in the underground lounge. They were gathered around Dr. Donnenfeld's favorite china teapot, a forlorn plume of steam drifting from its spout.

Sari suddenly jumped up from the couch, stomped across the room, and whirled on the group. "Dammit, Mitchell! She's not dead!"

His basset hound eyes opened wide. "I know that." "Then don't talk like she is."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know I was," Mitchell said, sounding wounded.

"Well you *are*. Just stop it, huh?"

His voice sharpened. "I said I was sorry. Geez, everything turns into an argument with you."

"I'm not arguing. I just don't see the point in bringing everybody's morale down to where—"

"I wasn't—"

Lauren raised a hand and cut in. "Hey, slow down here!"

The verbal swordplay broke off, and she took the opening. "I know what you're going through. Really. Remember that my father was missing inside a Mother Ship for months during the first invasion. So I know the frustration and the anger. I tried to chop Pete's head off a few times back then."

Pete nodded. "I can vouch for that. The thing to help you through it is that we're *all* worried about Hannah."

Sari lowered her head and breathed deeply. “You’re right.” She touched Mitchell’s arm. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too. I’ll try to be more upbeat.”

“But it’s so damned—*frustrating*, just sitting here doing nothing,” Sari blurted, pacing from one wall to the other.

“But we are doing something, Sari,” Pete said, trying to be comforting. “We’re doing what we can.”

“That’s right,” Lauren agreed. “There are lots of government and resistance people out there looking for leads. Something’ll break, and when it does, we’ll be ready to move.”

They heard a throat-clearing sound from the doorway, then a familiar British accent. “You’ve got your break,” said Neville More.

Astonished heads turned to see him standing there with Kenny, the Japanese computer master. More was dressed in the crisp red uniform of a Visitor captain.

“I went topside to take a little walk,” Kenny explained, “and I saw a lizard shuttle coming right at me. I started to run back to pull the alarm when *this* guy gets out and calls my name.”

Her face drained of color and emotion, Sari stepped up to More and slapped him hard across the face. Pete leaped over Lauren’s outstretched legs to stop any continued pummeling Sari might have in mind.

“Thanks, mate,” said Neville as he rubbed his jaw. “Frankly, *mate*, I’d like to finish the job myself. But first I’d like to know what the hell you’re doing here.”

Neville spotted the tea. “Mind if I have a cup?” He didn’t wait for permission, just poured some for himself and sat a safe distance away from Sari in a single chair.

“If I were you,” Pete prompted, “I’d start talking.”

“Ah, yes. I can understand your curiosity. First, when I last saw the good Dr. Donnenfeld, she was alive and well and giving Diana fits. She’d just gotten

through two hours of interrogation with flying colors.”

“If Diana tortures her,” Sari spat, rising from the couch, “that’ll be nothing compared to what I’ll do to you.”

Pete pulled her back down. “Sit!”

At first tensed for another assault, Neville then relaxed—a little. “When I left the Mother Ship, Hannah hadn’t been tortured yet.”

“*When* you left,” said Lauren. “Why *did* you leave?” “Let’s just say that Diana and I had a parting of the ways. I’ve never been much for taking orders, especially when they’re wrong. So here I am.”

“You son of a bitch,” Mitchell growled, his puffy cheeks quivering. “You have the balls to come back here after what you did?”

“Pardon me, but I didn’t expect to be greeted with open arms, Mitchell. However, I did think you’d be interested in getting Hannah back before Diana kills her.”

“Why didn’t you bring her with you?” Lauren wanted to know.

“Oh, I tried. Believe me, Miss Stewart. But Diana had just begun a second round of questioning. I couldn’t get to her. With your help, I think we can get her out. Interested?” Mitchell’s eyes burned with cold fury. “Why should we trust you? You could be here on Diana’s orders, laying a trap to snare the rest of us. A few more resistance prizes would net you a few more pats on the head from the top lizard, wouldn’t it?” he taunted.

Neville’s mouth twitched. “I don’t do anything for pats on the head—get that straight,” he said, shoving Mitchell with a jab to the shoulder. “I’ve got no regrets for the people I screwed, my so-called colleagues who’ve done their best to destroy me over the years.”

“We never did anything to you,” Sari said, her voice a confused mix of personal pain and professional pride.

“Yes, well, a few innocents sometimes have to get caught in the crossfire.”

Lauren squinted at More. “So why the sudden turnabout?” Neville gave the question an extra moment of consideration. “I have my own code of justice, Miss Stewart.”

“Honor among thieves?” she parried.

“In a manner of speaking. I’d never claim to be bound by the same rules that others might follow. But within my own context, I think I apply my code fairly. It’s something I’ve had to do to survive in a world not of my own making, and I don’t apologize for that. One of my cardinal rules, if you will, is that no one abuses Neville More. The Visitors have done just that.” “So it’s their turn to pay the piper,” Pete concluded. “Exactly. If this all works out according to plan, you get your precious Dr. Donnenfeld back—in one piece, I hope—and I get my required measure of revenge on the Visitors. I believe that sounds fair.”

“Hey, uh, I don’t want to be a wet blanket or anything,” Mitchell said, “but I still don’t trust this creep.”

“Let me put it to you this way, Mitchell, old boy. You let me waltz out that door, and the best that can happen is that Hannah Donnenfeld dies in Diana’s torture chamber. At worst, Diana also gets the information about the oil bacteria before your mentor expires. If we cooperate with each other, that’s your only realistic chance to save her life. Comprenez?”

Mitchell squared his shoulders belligerently. “Okay, what if we go along? Just how the hell are we going to get on to the Mother Ship?”

Neville smiled in crafty confidence. “Just so happens,” he said, buffing his fingernails across his Visitor uniform, “that I know how to circumvent virtually every security code and procedure on that ship. I can get us on and I can get us off.” “That’s a start,” Pete said, “but how do we get Hannah off with us?”

“I’ve got an idea,” Lauren said. “Neville, can you tap into the Mother Ship’s main computers once we’re aboard?” “Sure. What’ve you got in mind?”

“It’s very simple. We don’t remove Hannah Donnenfeld. We remove a generic dead human.”

Noting questioning looks all around, Lauren began to explain. . . .

Chapter 13

Julie Parrish shaded her eyes as she scanned the pale blue sky over the desert outside Los Angeles. Elizabeth Maxwell, the half-Visitor, half-human starchild, stood next to her. Both petite, both blond, both wearing blue jeans and tan safari shirts, they could have passed for sisters.

“There,” Elizabeth said softly.

“I don’t see—”

Elizabeth pointed and Julie followed the sightline. Then she spotted it—a Visitor shuttlecraft, the smaller, lightly armed model, approaching from the northeast. The alien craft came directly toward them, descending swiftly once it dipped over the rim of the canyon in which the pair of California resistance fighters waited. A fully loaded Chevy Blazer wagon was parked with them, and they watched as the whisper-quiet shuttle settled down toward a typically gentle landing.

“You’ve met them before, Julie?”

“Mm-hm. Back during the first war, I had to fly there to use their computers in New York to help create the red dust. And Mike went that one time a couple of months ago.”

“Did you meet Dr. Donnenfeld when you were there?”

Julie smiled at the recollection. “Oh, yeah. She’s quite a lady, Elizabeth. You know, she asked me to come work at Brook Cove after the war.”

“Do you ever wish you had?”

Julie nibbled her upper lip wistfully. “Sometimes. Back then, I thought Mike and I might have something going and that was one of the reasons I stayed around here. But that didn’t exactly work out. And if I’d moved to New York, I wouldn’t have been here when the Visitors came back. And I wouldn’t have had to go through that hell with Nathan Bates and Science Frontiers. But I also

wouldn't have been fighting side by side with you and the rest of our group. If I *had* to wind up fighting somewhere, I'd just as soon have it be here with you guys." Elizabeth's guileless blue eyes were open wide. "I don't know what I would've done without you. I'd probably be dead by now."

Julie brushed a strand of hair off the younger woman's face. "Oh, you'd've done fine without me."

"Uh-uh." Elizabeth shook her head. "I'm glad you stayed here."

They retreated a couple of strides as the shuttle's thrusters kicked up a veil of sandy dust. The engines shut down and the gull-wing hatch in the small vessel's fuselage lifted. The familiar faces of Lauren Stewart and Peter Forsythe appeared in the opening, and Julie trotted forward to greet them. Elizabeth followed two steps behind. The New Yorkers took turns hugging Julie, then stood back.

"Pete, Lauren, I'd like you to meet Elizabeth Maxwell." The young woman batted her eyelashes shyly and shook their hands. "I've heard a lot about you and the White Christmas group," she said. "Do you still use that name?" Lauren nodded. "And we've heard plenty about you, too." Julie put a proud arm around Elizabeth's shoulders. "She's become a full-fledged resistance fighter in the past few months."

"Don't I get an introduction?" said a British-accented voice from just inside the hatchway. Neville More crouched low and jumped down to the ground. He was dressed in Visitor coveralls, while Lauren and Pete wore street clothes.

"I suppose," Pete replied grudgingly. "Julie, Elizabeth, this is Neville More, the infamous computer expert who got us into this mess."

"Ah, but I'm going to get you out of it."

"Too late to stop all the damage your computer viruses have caused all over the country," Pete countered sharply.

"Peter, Peter," Lauren cut in, "we don't have time to argue. Someday, Julie, if we live through this, we'll tell you the whole story. But we'd better make our trade and get moving."

“It’s a good thing you’ve got some spare Visitor medical uniforms,” said Pete. “I don’t think our plan would have much chance if we couldn’t pass ourselves off as Visitor docs.” Julie grinned. “Just a little bonus we got from having a fifth-column doctor on our side. I hope the uniforms fit you.” “We’ll manage,” said Lauren. “We got everything you said you needed.”

“Fantastic! We especially need the ammo clips for the Ingram automatics.”

Pete poked Neville in the ribs. “Help me unload the stuff.” Neville tipped his Visitor cap to the women. “Sure thing, mate.” He went back inside the shuttle and Pete followed. “Elizabeth,” Julie said, “go get the truck?”

“Okay.”

Julie and Lauren watched the starchild run over and climb in. “She loves to drive,” Julie said. “When she first reached this size and physical development, she was like a three-year-old in an eighteen-year-old’s body. She was really withdrawn and afraid.”

“Who could blame her?”

Julie nodded. “And then, for a long time, we were all overprotective. That really got to her—she took some crazy chances to prove to us that she could carry her own weight. We got the idea. And those alien powers of hers come in very handy at times.”

Elizabeth parked the four-by-four close to the shuttle and opened the tailgate. Pete and Neville carried cartons directly to the truck, and the women clambered inside the aircraft to help. When the dozen crates were transferred, Elizabeth handed a plastic bag to Lauren.

“Here are the uniforms.”

“Oh, there’s something else.” Julie reached into her shirt pocket. “Here—these are the latest medical codes the Visitors are using.”

“From your friendly fifth columnist?” asked Pete.

“Yeah. He’s a medical student. Nice kid. Name’s Howie. Well, thanks for all the supplies.”

“Our pleasure,” Lauren said. “It must be tough being in a war-zone area. Sometimes, back in the relative safety of New York, we forget what you must be going through.”

Pete snapped his fingers. “Oh, yeah. We threw in a little surprise.”

Julie’s eyebrows arched. “Oh?”

Lauren smirked. “I figured a freedom fighter doesn’t have the time to sit around getting fat—looks like you two don’t have to worry about that—so we dug up some chocolates for you.”

“Hallelujah!” Julie crowed, arms uplifted. “Do you know how long it’s been since I tasted chocolate?”

“That’s what we figured,” Lauren laughed. “Indulge.” “We will, believe me!” Julie wrapped Lauren and Pete in heartfelt hugs. “Good luck.”

Neville climbed back into the ship first. Lauren and Pete paused in the open hatch to wave, then ducked inside. The gull-wing came down and the engines emitted an eerie whistle as they came to full power. The shuttlecraft lifted off and headed for Diana’s Mother Ship, hanging in the distance like a storm cloud over the City of Angels.

With Peter’s steady hand at the controls, they approached the giant starship from below. The bulk of the ship blocked out direct sunlight, and in the shadows the docking port yawned like a mouth on the ventral surface of some mythic whale. Circling slowly, Pete steered into a final docking angle.

“Are you sure they’re not going to stop us and kill us right there on the hangar deck?” Pete said to Neville.

“Of course I’m sure,” Neville huffed. “You’re not dealing with an amateur here, Forsythe.”

Pete smiled mirthlessly. “No, just a psychotic turncoat.” “More flattery, eh?”

“Sure thing, mate,” Pete mimicked.

“All right, I’ll go over it one more time for the slow learners among us. When I

took this shuttle, I logged in according to all the rules. So it was not stolen—merely borrowed. Besides, with a ship this size and a shorthanded crew stretched in far too many directions, they probably wouldn't have noticed one little missing craft anyway. Just as an aside, if you resistance chaps do beat the Visitors, their own mismanagement may be what does the trick.”

“Napoleon,” Lauren murmured from her seat behind the cockpit.

Pete glanced over his shoulder. “Wha—?”

“Napoleon. What Neville was saying. You know, when Napoleon tried to invade Russia. Hitler, too. They wound up in strange territory, with supply lines stretched to the breaking point. Trying to conquer too much with too little.”

“Right you are,” Neville agreed brightly. “Having seen both sides of the coin, so to speak, I'd say you may just outlast the lizards. But that's about your only hope.”

“If we do outlast 'em,” Pete said smugly, “you'll be hauled up on treason charges.”

More eased into an ingratiating smile. “Don't be too hasty with your judgments, Forsythe. You're not going to be victors tomorrow. Lots could happen between now and the end of this war. If there ever *is* an end, eh?”

Pete straightened in the pilot's seat, fingers skipping over the controls without touching them, double-checking important settings. “Okay, folks, here we go. You better be right, Neville, or this could be the shortest rescue attempt on record.”

“Just let me do the talking.”

Cutting back on the throttle, Peter aimed for the landing cross marked on the hangar deck, then set the shuttle down exactly on target.

“Nice work, Forsythe,” Neville mumbled.

With the engines shut down, Neville tripped the switch that raised the hatch. An *au nature I* Visitor, his oily dark green scales not hidden under any human disguise, stood waiting by the shuttle with a clipboard in hand. He saluted and

the Englishman acknowledged with a nod, then took the clipboard. He touched four contact points with a stylus, a different pattern of lights blinking across the electronic board with each one. He handed it back. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Come along, Doctors.” Lauren and Pete followed, now in uniforms matching Neville’s, complete with medical armband, caps, and dark glasses. Neville looked back to the reptilian officer. “Oh, Lieutenant, please leave this shuttle as is. We’re just making a brief stop and then we’ll be going back to the planet surface.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Neville turned smartly, and Pete and Lauren had to move quickly to keep pace with his regimental stride.

“Come along, Doctors,” he repeated, command in his tone.

Pete gritted his teeth, fighting the urge to *klop* More across the back of the skull. He made a mental note to do it later— after Hannah was back at Brook Cove, safe and secure.

Trying not to gape like a loud-shirted tourist, Pete found it difficult not to glance furtively around. He’d never been aboard a Visitor starship before and he was overwhelmed by the impression of size. He’d been aboard American naval vessels, but despite their expansive dimensions, he’d never lost sight of the fact he was indeed inside a ship. Perhaps it was the narrow corridors and low ceilings.

But the Mother Ship felt more like being inside a huge building—wider hallways, full-size doors. The lighting was somewhat dim—he recalled that from the initial taped tours broadcast on network television in the first days after the Visitors had arrived, back when they were pushing the big lie of friendly contact.

Neville certainly did seem to know his way around. He marched them to an elevator, which he directed by voice command to the sick-bay level. The door slid open to reveal a nearly empty ward, with medical beds lining the side walls. A small computer screen was mounted adjacent to each bed. The two that had Visitor patients in them at the moment displayed body function readouts on their accompanying screens. One of the Visitors was a female with a sharp-featured human face and a green-scaled arm soaking in a pan filled with a bubbling violet solution. The other patient was completely stripped of his human skin casing and

was being examined by an attending female with a young human face and dark curly hair. The patient had both legs wrapped in molded pods that must have been casts. Neville raised a hand and stopped at the second patient.

“Nurse, may I see that chart?” He reached out for an electronic clipboard similar to the one he’d signed on the hangar deck. Then he beckoned Lauren and Peter to join him at the bedside. They hesitated, shifting on their feet in discomfort they hoped wasn’t obvious. “Doctors, I’d like you to see this. ” Then to the nurse: “They’re visiting from a field hospital. I just wanted to show them how well we treat major trauma to limbs once injured troops are transferred up here from the planet.”

He patted the nurse on the arm. “Couldn’t do it without the great support we get from our medical staff.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Neville held the chart up so Pete and Lauren could view it. The display flashed an alphabet soup of Visitor letters, which they regarded seriously as if really reading it. Neville pulled it away and returned it to a bracket at the foot of the bed.

“Thank *you*, nurse, uh . . .”

“Bridget,” she said, guessing he was fishing for her name.

“Ah, yes, Bridget.” He started to lead his colleagues away, then stopped and spun halfway around. “Oh, one other thing, Bridget. The human prisoner—the old woman, Dr. Donnenfeld? Do you know if she survived her interrogation session?”

“Yes—yes, she did. Barely, from what I hear.”

“Is she in sick bay, then?”

“Yes, Doctor. In the security section—not that she’s in any shape to be escaping.”

Pete and Lauren exchanged quick, worried looks.

“I may take a look in on her,” Neville went on. “I’ve got clearance for that area. Thank you very much, Bridget. And keep up the good work.”

“Yes, Doctor.”

With a crooked finger, the Englishman motioned his fellow imposters to follow.

“That didn’t sound too good,” Pete whispered.

“At least she’s alive,” said Neville.

He led them to the end of the main ward, where a sturdy door stood in their way. Through a small window they could peek in. Hannah Donnenfeld lay motionless on a diagnostic bed, intravenous tubes in her left arm.

“Can you get us in there?” said Lauren.

“That code list will make things much faster. Let me see it.” Peter pulled the slip of paper from his pocket but wouldn’t let Neville take it. “I’ll hold on to this—you just read it.” “Peter, Peter ... so suspicious. That list is useless to you without me.”

“Let’s just say it’s my security blanket. Open the door.” More turned to the computer terminal pad mounted in a wall niche, his long fingers hovering above the keys. The Visitor characters on the keyboard were less than gibberish to Pete. “Can you really read that?” he asked.

Neville shrugged. “No more foreign than Russian, and I learned that in two weeks.” He took one more look at the code list, then tapped out a six-tone entry. The hand-sized screen above the panel flashed red, then purple, finally blue. “That’s their equivalent of our red, yellow, green.”

With that, they heard a whirring, then the clicking of a lock disengaging. Neville gripped the handle and slid the door aside. “One of us has to stand guard out here.”

Lauren pursed her lips. “Well, we’re not going to trust you, and Pete has to examine Hannah. That leaves me. Hurry up, guys.”

At her last word, Pete was already inside the security chamber, leaning over

Hannah. Neville waited behind him. “Hannah,” Pete said urgently.

Her eyelids fluttered open, but her expression remained blank, unfocused. Then, with obvious strain, she lifted her right hand off the bed’s metallic covering, made a fist, and gave a weak thumbs-up sign.

Pete grinned down at her, then turned to the life-function monitor screen. “Dammit—I wish I knew what this was saying.”

“Does it matter?”

“Of course it matters. I’d really like to know if moving her is going to kill her.”

“*Not* moving her is the surest way to kill her, eh, mate?” Pete’s lips tightened into a thin line. Neville’s comment required no reply, and he busied himself with measuring Hannah’s vitals as best he could. He took her pulse, laid a hand on her forehead to gauge body temperature, bent over to place an ear on her chest, listening for fluid in her lungs, and gingerly touched her limbs and joints to ascertain if anything had been broken.

“Can you hear me, Hannah?” he asked. “Just squeeze my hand if you understand me. Once for yes, twice for no. Don’t try to talk. Understand?”

One squeeze, very weak.

“Okay, we’re going to try to get you out of here. The only way we can do it is to sneak you out as a corpse. Understand?” One squeeze, about the same. Pete wished she had more strength but didn’t expect miracles.

“Neville, get that gurney over here. Hannah, once you’re on that table, you’re dead as an overcooked steak. Got it? We’re going to wrap you in one of their body bags. You’ll look like E.T. when they carted him away from Elliot.”

A squeeze, much firmer this time. Pete smiled broadly, then took a hypo out of his medical belt pouch.

“Okay—I’m going to give you a shot. It’s a muscle relaxant combined with a tranquilizer. Once it takes effect, only a doctor could tell you were alive. You ready?”

The old woman's cracked lips parted. "Ready, Dr. Frankenstein." Thumbs up again.

Rolling up her sleeve, Pete swabbed a spot with an alcohol pad, then pressed the plunger. "Sweet dreams, Hannah." Neville had the body shroud and the gurney ready. The cart had glowing antigrav pods where its four wheels should have been.

"Now that's a good idea," Pete approved. "If you want to get rich again, Neville, market these things to hospitals." "Is she going to get through this?"

Pete gave Neville a searching look, then decided against asking if he really cared. "I wish I knew." He removed the IV tubes. The needles into her flesh were so fine they left no marks, but he placed tiny bandages over the spots anyway, just to be on the safe side. "Ready, set, *lift*."

In perfect unison, they swung Hannah's frail body onto the gurney, which settled slightly on the antigrav supports. After a moment, Pete folded the two sides of the shroud over her face and fastened it, leaving just an inch open for some air. He saw Neville's concern. "She won't suffocate. She's barely breathing anyway. Now it's your turn. Program in whatever authorization we need to get off the ship with her."

There was a desk with a larger computer terminal across the chamber, and Neville approached it, trepidation slowing his step.

"Something wrong?" Pete asked.

More clasped his hands and cracked his knuckles. "Not a thing." He started to turn away when a sound snagged his ear.

It was Pete, cocking a compact automatic pistol that he'd hidden in his medical pouch. "Just a little reminder, Neville. If you're setting us up, the first thing I'll do is shoot you."

"Not to worry, Forsythe, not to worry," said Neville, summoning up a suave half smile. Then he got to work. Pete glanced nervously from the computer screen in front of Neville, upon which he couldn't read a word, to Hannah's deathly still form, to Lauren's head, just visible in the window. Though it seemed like hours, Neville was done in just over two minutes.

“Let’s go, Forsythe, old boy. We’ve got a shuttle to catch.” He tapped on the glass and Lauren spun around. She then slid the heavy door open and sucked her breath in at the sight of Hannah’s body.

“My God, she does look dead.”

“Her name is no longer Donnenfeld,” Neville announced, producing a small plastic card with a silver strip across it. “This is Sylvia Newton, a human of no great consequence who expired while in Visitor custody. She’s being returned to the Medical Experimentation Center in San Diego for cellular-preservation experiments. Always on the lookout for better ways of storing food, we’re part of a team which is testing a new technique. Poor Mrs. Newton has been injected with a special solution to stimulate her edible cells, even though her heart and brain have stopped. Such treatment is to be done in the field wherever human bodies may be found, increasing the time available to get dead humans to storage. If this works, we’ll no longer have to keep humans who are bound for eventual consumption alive in order to store them.” Neville completed his speech with a pleased grin.

“Are they really working on that?” Lauren asked in horror.

“As we speak, Miss Stewart.”

“And that’s what you programmed in as authorization?”

“Exactly. And this is Mrs. Newton’s ID card,” he said, brandishing the square plastic. “This means we’re in a bloody big hurry, because we must get the late Mrs. Newton back to the San Diego center in order to measure any unwanted deterioration of tissues.”

“Fine,” Pete said. “Let’s go.”

“Oh, one last thing,” Neville said, his finger jabbing the wall intercom. “Nurse Bridget, Nurse Bridget, please report to the biopsy lab immediately.”

Then he craned around the corner into the main ward. The nurse was already heading out into the corridor.

“Now,” Neville ordered. Pete took the rear end of the cart, Lauren the front, and Neville led the way, striding authoritatively past the two injured Visitors and out

of the wardroom. As the door slid closed behind them, he leaned over to Lauren.

“The key is to look like you know what you’re doing,” he muttered.

Whatever might happen later, Pete was amazed that they’d made it almost to the hangar level without being stopped. He swore to himself that it would be impossible to be inconspicuous bearing a body through the entire starship. But Neville More was a man obviously accustomed to bluffing his way out of dangerous situations. He made no attempt to be furtive and not a single Visitor raised any questions about who they were or what they were doing.

Until they reached the docking bay.

The doors parted and Neville strolled through. Lauren and Pete had no choice but to follow with Hannah’s inert body. Pete looked around—there was a fair amount of activity on the hangar deck, with crews working over several skyfighters and cargo shuttles.

“Captain, sir,” a voice called.

Neville gave no notice, but Pete saw the reptilian lieutenant they’d dealt with when they came aboard trotting directly toward them. He intercepted them a few yards from their ship, waving his black cap and revealing the spiny crest atop his head. He was shorter than Neville, but stockier, and he planted himself between them and the shuttle, determined not to be ignored.

Pete wondered fleetingly if Neville’s lack of respect for the lieutenant was a miscalculation. He’d demonstrated a knack for buttering up occupants of the pecking order’s lower rungs, but at this key junction he’d chosen not to bother. *Should I say something?* Neville had gotten them this far, but this far wasn’t far enough. *Could still be a trap. . . .*

Pete opted for silence, but his hand slipped discreetly into the medical pouch and tightened around the pistol stock.

“What is it, Lieutenant?” Neville’s tone displayed carefully modulated annoyance.

“Uh, you know I need to see authorization for any humans being removed from the Mother Ship.”

“This is a corpse.” Neville bit off each word. “I am a medical officer attached to the San Diego Experimentation Center, and every second you delay me endangers this very important study of food preservation.”

“I’m sorry about that, Captain, but regulations are regulations. I have to confirm your authorization. May I see your card?”

Neville licked his lips. “Uh, card?”

The lieutenant crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes, sir.” He unclipped a palm-sized holoreader from his belt. “I can’t let you go without it.”

Peter’s heart rate accelerated as he saw Neville’s air of superiority dissolve.

“Um, Lieutenant,” he demanded of Pete, “do *you* have the card?”

At first instinct, Pete bridled at the accusative edge in Neville’s accent. Then he realized it was a last-ditch effort to carry on the act—blame the subordinates. Gamely, Pete played his part, adopting the guilty appearance of a third baseman who’d just booted an easy grounder and possibly blown the pennant. “Uh, no, sir. I don’t have any card. I didn’t think I, uh—”

“Captain,” the reptilian officer added helpfully, “it’s a new regulation and I really have to follow it if I—”

“A new regulation?” Neville said sharply.

Pete mentally crossed his fingers, hoping this was the opening they needed.

“Nobody told me about a new regulation. Here I am working my fingers to the scales down on that bloody awful planet and nobody bothers to tell me about a new regulation. I’ll have somebody’s head for this if their stupidity causes the ruination of this stage of the experiment,” he stormed. “/ know who it was. It was that *nurse*, what’s her name? Bridget! As soon as I come back aboard, I’m going to report her to Diana myself.”

“I can take care of that, sir,” said the lieutenant.

“No, no, I want to do this myself. I can’t stand incompetence.”

Pete stepped forward. “Captain, sir, since it is a new regulation, maybe she shouldn’t be treated so harshly. I really don’t think the delay is going to disrupt the experiment. At least, not as long as we get going immediately.”

“Well, maybe you’re right, Peter,” said Neville, his jaw jutting like a Churchillian bulldog. “Let’s just let the lieutenant here check the main authorization file and then, with his permission, we’ll be on our way. Eh, Lieutenant?”

“Oh, *yes sir.*” The Visitor went to the computer terminal on a nearby bulkhead and tapped in his query. In a few seconds several sentences and numbers marched across the screen.

His lipless mouth spread into what Pete guessed to be a smile, needle-sharp teeth just visible.

“Yes, yes, of course, Captain *Neville*. I’m sorry, but I couldn’t recall your name. Everything’s right here. You’re cleared to go. Sorry for the inconvenience, sir.”

More raised one eyebrow menacingly. “Inconvenience? If this delay ruins six weeks’ worth of research before we get our results, I’ll be back to have a word with Diana about idiotic rules that interfere with the war effort. You can be sure of that.”

The alien snapped a salute. “*Yessir!*”

Arm frozen in position, he watched them place the litter and body into the small shuttle. Only when the hatch had closed did he scurry off to attend to other duties.

Pete strapped himself into the pilot’s seat while Neville and Lauren secured Hannah in the aft compartment.

“Hey, Neville, I have to give you credit for that performance. You are one slippery bastard.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to it, Forsythe. In working with the Visitors, I’ve learned they’re not so very different from the flower of Mother Earth. Lizards don’t like to admit they don’t know what they’re doing any more than we do.”

Pete chuckled as he started the engines. “Everybody strapped in? Okay, here we go. . . .”

The shuttle rocked gently as Pete eased the throttle ahead to takeoff speed. Collectively, they held their breath until they’d cleared the rim of the docking port. But the oppressive shadow of the mammoth spaceship still loomed over them. Kissing caution good-bye, Pete jammed the throttle to full power and they rocketed out into crystal-blue skies. With a neatly executed roll, Pete steered northeast toward home.

Bridget heard the doors to her ward hiss open and saw Diana enter with Dr. Stavros. She started to rise and salute, but the superior officers bustled past without even acknowledging her presence.

“Diana, it’s too soon,” Stavros insisted, a plaintive note in his voice. He hurried to keep up with the commander’s long strides.

But the quick-paced clicking of Diana’s heels on the deck didn’t slow. “The decision is mine. We need that information.” They reached the security chamber around the corner from the main ward. “Open the door,” she ordered.

With a subservient incline of the head, Stavros obeyed. Diana stepped in first and instantly spat a curse in her native language. The doctor darted past her and stared at the empty diagnostic bed, IV tubes hanging uselessly from their fluid containers.

Diana phrased her next words with stiletto sharpness. “Your patient seems to be missing, Stavros. Find her—or you may be very sorry you were transferred to my ship.”

Chapter 14

They returned Hannah Donnenfeld to Brook Cove without incident. Lauren called her father away from his Harlem office and medical school duties to take care of his old friend while she and Pete escorted Neville More into New York City to meet with the President in his Hyatt suite.

“I’d like to spit in your eye,” William Brent Morrow said with the brittle calm of a parent driven to the brink of temper’s control, “but Peter and Lauren think I shouldn’t.”

More seemed to cower slightly in his chair as Morrow stood over him. The President had cowboy boots on, adding three inches to his normally imposing stature. Pete had always marveled how well the man made use of his intimidating bulk, and this was an appropriate occasion.

With a pale ghost of his charming smile, Neville gestured in uncharacteristic humility. “Ah, yes. My cheering section over there.”

Nestled comfortably in the deep padding of the living room couch, Pete and Lauren remained silent, letting Morrow conduct the session.

“I could have you arrested right now. Y’know that, son.” Neville rubbed the back of his neck, trying to squeeze out the tension wound into his muscles. “Yes, sir, I do realize that. But let’s cut right to the heart of the matter, shall we? You lock me up—”

Morrow spread a cautionary hand. “Don’t forget the possibility of execution for treason.”

Pete grinned to himself. He’d noticed that Neville was just about to break free of Morrow’s dominating spell, like a football running back about to escape a tangle of would-be tacklers. But Morrow’s passing reminder was just enough to cut the Englishman off at the knees.

“Uh, yes, well, as I was saying,” he stammered. “If I am incarcerated, you lose your only means of destroying that drilling platform Diana’s set up in the Persian

Gulf.” Settling back into the soft cushions of his easy chair, Morrow aimed an unblinking gaze at Neville. “What makes you so sure that’s what we plan to do?”

“Because you know as well as I do that Diana *will* make use of it sooner or later. And I’m the only one who can crack the computerized security system on that platform.”

“Another project of yours?” Lauren asked.

“I created it, I can break it. I know things about that system Diana doesn’t.”

“Now hold on a minute,” Pete said, looking like he’d just bitten into a sour grapefruit. “Your chiseling into an already existing system like the one on the Mother Ship and learning to play with it, that’s one thing. But I can’t believe Diana didn’t have an eye on you all the time you worked on the computers and programming for the drilling rig.”

“Oh, I didn’t say I wasn’t under scrutiny. I even let her catch me three or four times, just so she wouldn’t think I’d been unbelievably well-behaved. But it doesn’t take much for a clever fellow like me to program in a few back door entries. I even sifted in their very own computer virus. I guaranteed myself access to the system, and I guaranteed myself final control. Only you, Mr. President, can keep me from stopping Diana’s little oil game.”

“Okay, cut the horse manure, Mr. More. You’ve obviously given this some thought before y’all came up here. Let’s hear it.”

“The only way to stop Diana is for me to go to the Middle East and climb aboard that drilling platform.” Neville leaned forward, intensity rising. “I’ll need that Visitor shuttle I appropriated, and I’ll need a free hand, without any interference whatsoever.”

Morrow leaned across the space between them, extended one powerful arm, and stabbed Neville More in the chest with his finger. “You’ll do what *I* tell you to do, son. You’d do real well to recall that you’re in the custody of the United States government. Pete and Lauren are my personally designated agents, and they’ve got my authorization to do whatever is necessary to keep you in line.”

Reaching for the shiny coffeepot on the table, Morrow poured himself a cup, adding milk and a packet of sugar. “You made your pitch—here’s mine,” he

continued. “You don’t cooperate with us, I’ll turn you over to Diana. What d’ya wanna bet she’s discovered that her prize prisoner’s flown the coop by now? And, son of a gun, *you’re* not aboard her ship anymore either! Who d’you think she’s blaming about now? Who d’you think she’d love to have for dinner—and I *do* mean for dinner.”

In the shadows of her darkened cabin, Diana slouched in her overstuffed chair, legs curled under her and a bowl of white mice in her lap. She felt a transient impulse to tip the bowl up and gobble the furry creatures as swiftly as her gullet could swallow them. Instead, she demurely selected a single mouse—true, it was the largest of the lot—and bit into it, killing it before it could squeal. No sounds of distress at all, just the crunching of tiny bones.

The door chimed and she ran a fretful hand through her hair, arranging it as best she could before touching the toggle switch and allowing Lydia and Dr. Stavros to enter. Diana assumed a more formal posture when she saw that Lydia’s lustrous blond hair was carefully coiffed in attractive ringlets and she was wearing a sleek black gown cut daringly low off one shoulder and slit high up the opposite thigh.

“You needn’t have gotten dressed up to give me your report, Lydia. ”

“Don’t worry, Diana, I didn’t,” Lydia snickered. “I have a dinner engagement with a young lieutenant.”

“Becoming predatory in your old age, darling?”

“Is that how it was for you, Commander?”

“Don’t be insubordinate. Just give me your report.”

“I’d be glad to. Dr. Stavros examined the computer records. He found a dead human body with Dr. Donnenfeld’s ID card in storage hold four.”

“That’s impossible.”

Stavros bowed shortly. “There was a switch made without anyone’s knowledge. Donnenfeld was tagged as Sylvia Newton, deceased, and removed from the ship.”

“We know she was removed. To where and by whom, Lydia?”

“The deck officer in the docking bay said three medical personnel escorted the body, claiming they were taking it to the San Diego Experimental Center for food-perservation studies.”

“That deck officer was lying,” Diana snapped.

“That’s what I thought, but I checked the authorization codes. The order was in fact logged properly,” Lydia said.

“And who was given the authorization?”

Lydia tried not to smirk. “A Dr. Neville.” She paused for Diana to consider that bit of information. “I warned you not to trust him.”

“I didn’t trust him,” Diana snarled. “He was under constant surveillance.”

“Not constant enough, *Commander*,” said Lydia pleasantly.

Diana’s lips spread into an arrogant smile. “Evidently not. I’ll plan to start an investigation into why *your* security team failed so miserably in that simple duty. Dismissed.”

Lydia spun on one high heel and stalked out. The befuddled Stavros stood in place.

“You, too—*out*.”

When the hatch slid shut and she was alone again, Diana raised the glass bowl to face level, fiery eyes locked on the mice. They were the eyes of a hunter, unblinking, angry, yet certain. She tipped the bowl. One by one the mice slid over the rim and down her throat.

She’d lost her primary prey today. She’d suffered betrayal. But there’d been some consolation as well. Just before Lydia and Stavros gave their report, she’d received a message from her science staff. The lab chief relayed news of a breakthrough. They’d found the flaw in the oil bacteria. A reformulated specimen would be ready within forty-eight hours. Soon after that, Earth’s largest known undersea oil deposit would be the target of her grand experiment.

And that would be just the beginning. Within weeks three-quarters of the humans' precious oil cache would become toxic waste.

The war would be over, and Diana would be much more than Supreme Commander. She would be conqueror—and queen.

Chapter 15

It hadn't taken Neville More long to agree to the President's terms. He'd had little choice. He, Pete, and Lauren repaired to the Brook Cove Lab to stock their Visitor shuttle with supplies. Not that the supersonic trip to the Middle East would take all that long—no more than four hours—but they wanted to be prepared just in case their flight was forcibly terminated short of their eventual destination. Pete had planned a route far to the north, as distant from alien-held territories as possible, so the danger of attack by marauding skyfighter patrols was limited.

The President saw to it that World Liberation Front defense forces were made aware of the grave and urgent mission so they wouldn't mistake the overflight of this lightly armed shuttle as an enemy foray.

There was another reason for the stop at Brook Cove—to see how Donnenfeld was recovering from her ordeal and to be briefed on her conclusions about Diana's deadly bacterial weapon. After that, they were off on their journey, given a solemn farewell by the lab staff gathered on the windswept bluff overlooking Oyster Bay Harbor.

Hannah had been allowed out of bed for the occasion, sitting in a wheelchair, sullen as a recalcitrant cat stuffed into a travel crate. As she waved after the retreating aircraft, Doc Stewart stood behind her. He had one hand on the wheelchair and one on Donnenfeld's shoulder.

"That for moral support?" she inquired acidly.

"No. It's to keep you from jumping out of that chair, lady," he shot back.

"I hate being trussed up in this contraption, George. And I don't need you pushing me around. Slavery's been abolished, or hadn't you heard?"

He made a gallant attempt to match her surly glare, but his dark brown face broke into a grin as he wheeled her back to her cabin.

"Oh, no, you don't, George Stewart. Flashing those pearly whites isn't going to

get you off the hook,” she railed. “*I’m* the one who’s supposed to do the mothering around here. I’m the perpetrator, not the victim!”

Sari James skipped alongside the traveling complaint show, with Mitchell approaching from the other side.

“Serves you right, Hannah,” Mitchell mocked.

“Hmph!” Sari snorted in humorous derision. “I always said she could dish it out but she couldn’t take it.”

Hannah yanked her Red Sox cap low over her brow. “I come back from the dead, and all I get is abuse.” She waved her hand like Queen Victoria signaling her coachmen. “Take me back to the Visitors!”

The flight was the longest Pete had piloted a Visitor vessel since he’d swooped Lauren off the roof of the United Nations building and romped to Hawaii for a vacation not long after the resistance had wrested their planet back from the aliens the first time around. He and his two companions had been quiet for most of the trip, and the computerized controls of the shuttle required Peter to do little more than steer.

As a result, he’d found himself with plenty of time to look out the windows and think about the perils of their mission (not a cheering topic) and about the natural beauty of the planet below. They passed over the tundra of Greenland, the expanse of ocean between North America and Europe and the intricate coastal carvings of the fjords of Scandinavia. Now they turned on a southerly course, over the jagged spine of mountains where Europe and Asia were joined.

“Hey, you awake up there?”

It was Lauren’s voice from the aft cabin. Pete turned in the pilot seat. “Wide awake. Just thinking.”

“About what?” Neville asked.

“Lots of things,” Pete shrugged. “Mostly about how incredibly peaceful the earth looks from the air. Especially up north where the Visitors aren’t.”

“How much longer do we have to go?” Lauren asked.

Pete glanced at the digital readouts. He'd learned to read that much Visitorese by mentally plugging decimal numbers in where little alien squiggles appeared. Gauges were gauges, pretty much. "About a half hour—late afternoon Israeli time."

"Have you ever been to this part of the world?" said Lauren.

Pete shook his head. Then he chuckled.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, I was just thinking how many times I said I didn't want to go to the Middle East as long as the Arabs and Jews were killing each other, that it was too damned dangerous. Too much risk of getting blown up by terrorists."

Lauren gave a knowing nod. "Uh-huh. And here the whole world's at war, and we *are* the terrorists who're going to blow things up."

"I guess it's true what they say then—eh, mates?" said Neville.

"What's that?" Pete wanted to know.

"Variety is indeed the spice of life. Well, I've never been there either."

"Whoa," Pete exclaimed. "What about that drilling rig?"

"That was built while I was at Brook Cove, Forsythe. I did all my work aboard the Mother Ship before I started touring the country. "

"Spreading good cheer and computer viruses," Pete growled. "How 'bout you, Laur?"

"I was here once on assignment with Olav Lindstrom. We stopped off in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. I always wanted to come back as a civilian." She looked out the window and sighed. "There's something strangely compelling about the Middle East—the place where our civilization started, where the three Western religions were bom, where all those biblical legends took place."

Neville nodded ironically. "Yes, also one of the places where bloodshed seems to

be an inextricable part of existence.”

“That’s part of what makes it so compelling,” said Lauren. “It’s like some mythic cross between a book of fairy tales, a history text come to life, and a macabre horror story.”

“Where are we landing, Forsythe?”

“At Masada. There’s a resistance base there.”

“How will we know when we’re there? Isn’t it just a spot in the desert?”

Pete and Lauren both turned to look at the Englishman. “You’ve never seen a picture of Masada?” said Lauren in disbelief.

“Nope.”

“Oh, we’ll know it when we see it,” Pete assured him.

The understatement in Pete’s phrase became apparent as soon as the shuttle entered visual range of Masada.

As if the Judean desert were an ocean, dust its water, and rocks, gullies, and dunes its waves, the great mesa rose up like some colossal ark cresting the rolling sea. The flat-topped mountain was indeed boat shaped, narrowing to a knife edge at its northern prow, angling out along both flanks and tapering again at the stem. The shifting sands of centuries curved steeply up Masada’s sides as if being cut by the bow, while rugged cliffs sculpted by time, by wind and grit and water, stretched out behind the rock like the wake of a ship.

Normally a bleached tan, the desert had been painted fiery russet by the late afternoon sun, and as Pete flew in from the northwest, Masada stood stark and majestic against a cruel blue sky.

The summit towered 1,300 feet over the desert floor. Rhomboid-shaped, it was nearly a half mile from end to end and two football fields across at its widest point. As they drew closer and dipped in altitude, they could see Masada was not quite flat—more like a moonscape, with hillocks casting rounded shadows. Scattered across the surface of the mesa were the squared-off ruins of structures dating back two thousand years, mixed oddly with three camouflage field tents

of modern vintage and netting that hid resistance helicopters.

Most striking of all, the northern promontory of Masada held an amazing triple-tiered palace cut right into the cliff in ascending steps.

Lauren broke the awed silence inside the shuttle as they slowed to landing speed, then hovered for a moment above the north edge. “King Herod the Great built that palace thirty years before the birth of Christ.” Her voice trembled with excitement. “Oooh, I can’t believe we’re here! I hope we get a chance to look around.”

Pete cleared his throat. “Well, we’re not leaving until just before dawn, so we’ve got this afternoon and evening to play tourist—if our resistance contacts don’t mind showing us the sights.”

“Then hurry up and land before the sun sets,” Lauren urged, socking him on the arm.

Setting the alien craft down about a hundred yards from the tents, Pete shut off the engines and Lauren popped the side hatch up. She jumped out first—then stopped suddenly. Neville and Pete followed and also stopped short, bumping into each other as they did.

“Paralyzed, Lauren?” said Pete sardonically.

Her only reply was to turn full circle, eyes wide, mouth agape in wonderment as she took in the complete panorama of the summit. The perimeter was surrounded by the remains of a stone wall that had to be almost a mile in circumference. Off to the east, no more than a couple of miles away, Masada overlooked the Dead Sea, its long, thin oval extending about forty-five miles from north to south. Salt marshes around the sea’s rim had evaporated in midday heat, leaving a bed of crystals to sparkle in the steep rays of afternoon light. The only sound was the eerie moan of the wind—until a staccato burst of semi-automatic gunfire split the silence. Stunned for a second, Pete, Lauren, and Neville hadn’t yet moved when the shots were followed by a voice echoing across the plateau.

“Don’t move,” the voice shouted. “What’s the password?”

Pete cupped his hands over his mouth, moving slowly so as not to cause any alarm. “It’s a phrase. . . .”

“Say it—we’re in no hurry.”

“Nothing sinks in the Dead Sea,” Pete called.

“Okay,” came a disembodied reply. “Counterphrase: That’s what my wife said before she drowned.”

Lauren turned slowly, an offended look on her face. “You didn’t tell me that was the counterphrase.”

“You didn’t ask,” said Pete with a shrug.

They heard footsteps and saw three men emerging from behind an ancient wall. All wore khaki fatigues. The leader was a tall, bearded Arab, followed by a skinny fellow with reddish hair and a second Arab with much darker skin.

“Is that true, nothing sinks in the Dead sea?” asked Pete. The bearded Arab laughed, flashing perfect white teeth. “That’s what they say,” he replied, his British accent causing raised eyebrows among the newcomers. “It’s eight times saltier than ocean water.”

“That’s right,” said the thin man, his accent marking him as an Israeli native. “Nothing sinks in it, and nothing lives in it either. I’m Lavi Mayer,” he said, extending his hand. He gestured to his bearded companion, then the third man. “This is Abdul ibn Aziz and Gamel Nefti.”

Pete introduced Lauren and Neville, and they exchanged handshakes all around.

“Welcome to Masada,” Lavi said. “I guess I’m the official host since this is Israel. When we get to Saudi Arabia, Abdul takes over the reins.”

Lauren gestured around them. “I’ve read about Masada, but this is absolutely incredible.”

“Care for the unofficial tour?” asked Lavi.

“If you hadn’t asked, we’d have begged,” Pete laughed. “But shouldn’t we do something about the shuttle, in case the Visitors fly over?”

“I’ll have the camouflage netting put over it,” Gamel said. “I’ve already had the

tour.” He moved off toward the tents. “Are you three the only ones up here?” Neville asked. Abdul shook his head, squinting into the sun. “No, we’ve got a dozen people up here most of the time. There are lots of places to hide, and as you can see, we’ve got quite a view from up here. We’ve also got electronic surveillance equipment.” Pete looked about questioningly. “Where can you hide up here? You don’t even have a blade of grass to crouch behind.” Lavi chortled. “We don’t hide on top of Masada, Pete. We hide *inside* Masada.”

Lauren snapped her fingers in recollection. “That’s right. I read about that, Pete. There’re all kinds of caves that go into the mountain.”

“Come on,” said Lavi. “It’ll be dark soon. One thing we don’t have is street lamps. Coming, Abdul?”

“You folks hungry?” the Arab said. Answered with nods, Abdul smiled. “I thought you would be. You give them the tour, Lavi—I’ll get dinner started. See you all in a bit.”

“My God, look at these frescoes, Peter!” Lauren said. They were on the lower terrace of the magnificent three-level palace clinging to the north face of the cliff. Lavi’s tour had progressed all over the flat plain atop Masada. They’d zipped through three small villas built by Herod the Great, King of the Jews from 37 to 4 B.C., and lingered in the large palace on the western side of the summit. This palace was the largest building standing; within its tumbledown walls of sun-baked bricks, there had once been administrative offices, storerooms, living quarters literally fit for a king, and a throne room.

That room, with four carefully edged indentations in its floor to support Herod’s throne canopy, was the place that spoke most strongly through the mists of twenty centuries. In the center the floor was made of tiny tiles laid in an intricate mosaic of pomegranates, wine, fig leaves, and patterns of swirls and geometric shapes.

Lavi showed them the swimming pool just outside the western palace, a ruined church put up by Byzantine monks who inhabited this lonely outpost four hundred years after Herod, an extensive complex of storerooms, and a large bathhouse near the north tip of the mesa.

Finally, with the sun drifting low, they wound up at the terraced palace. The frescoes over which Lauren exulted had been buried under the debris of more

than a millennium, but they'd survived, thanks in part to the arid air. Long after Herod had gone to dust, the paintings he'd gazed upon with pride were still there for modern eyes to admire. At the base of cracked plastered columns built against the rock face of Masada itself, gentle patterns of reds, browns, and salmon shades were just where royal artisans had brushed them, trying to imitate the look of marble.

"Why would Herod build this particular palace with all the others up on top?" Pete asked.

"Good question," Lavi said. "It obviously must have been incredibly difficult to build this place. But the north point is the highest spot on Masada—it's best for defense. And the wind here comes from the south almost continuously. And we're not talking about gentle breezes either. The north face is protected from the wind, and it's also shaded from the sun. In case you hadn't noticed, it's damned hot out here."

Neville rubbed his sleeve over his face. "We noticed, old boy."

"How do you know so much about Masada?" asked Lauren. "I was a volunteer working with the excavation team in 1965. Yigael Yadin was the archeologist in charge. Masada was mostly a big mystery before he came up here. No one had really dug under the rubble."

"Why so much interest?" said Neville. "I mean, not that it's not fascinating, but what's the significance of this particular place in the middle of a region where *every* place played a starring role in the Bible or ancient history?"

Lavi cocked his head. "You never heard the story?" Neville hadn't. A wide grin crossed Lavi's face and he plunged ahead. "Herod built all this because he wanted an impregnable fortress. He was afraid of the Jewish Zealots, who refused to accept his designation by the Romans as their king. And he was afraid Cleopatra and Egypt had designs on his little desert empire—though, personally, I would've thought Cleo had enough sand at home." He chuckled at his own joke.

"Ah, but things really started cooking at Masada in about 70 A.D. The Romans were in the process of overrunning Palestine and destroying the Temple in Jerusalem, not to mention burning the rest of the holy city. The rebellion against Rome was pretty much dead, except for Masada. It was a last outpost for raids,

for about two years. We were driving Flavius Silva, the Roman governor, crazy. Finally, he said enough's enough, and he brought the Tenth Legion out here to throw the Jews off Masada."

"How many Jews were there?" asked Pete.

"Nine hundred and sixty-seven. The odds were kind of like us fighting the Visitors. The Romans laid siege to the fortress and Silva thought he could starve the Jews out. But they actually had plenty of food and water."

Lauren was surprised. "Water? Up here?"

"Yes. Herod's engineers had built a very clever system of water-collection cisterns and aqueducts. It doesn't rain here often, but when it does, it floods. Half the summit turns into a shallow lake and flowers bloom like magic," he said, snapping his finger for emphasis.

"Was that enough to grow food?"

"Well, not really, but they'd socked away quite a supply. And there are all sorts of trails and pathways, so despite the siege, supplies could be brought in occasionally." He motioned them over to the edge of the terrace, facing west. "Down there—that's where some of the cisterns are. The water was channeled into the mountain, then fetched up by pail when needed. That part wasn't especially ingenious, but it *did* get the job done."

Sunset had streaked the sky with ribbons of purple and red, and they were quiet for a moment of reverent observation. When Lavi continued, his voice was more intense, yet softer, as feeling replaced volume.

"The siege lasted almost three years total. In the third year, Silva decided they had to *take* the fortress from the Jews. We weren't going to surrender."

Neville shook his head. "Take this place? How?" "Hmmm, you can't see it from here," said Lavi, "but around the west side of the mountain, the Romans built a giant ramp from the desert floor nearly to the top of the cliff." "We saw that when we flew in," Pete said. "I was wondering what it was. My god, how did they build anything that massive?"

"Slaves, prisoners of war. God knows, there's no shortage of dirt and rocks. With

enough labor, you can make a big pile of dirt and rocks. Then, at the top, they built a tower and mounted a battering ram.”

“Didn’t the Zealots shoot at them while they were doing all that building?” said Neville.

“Sure,” Lavi said. “But the Romans had plenty of ammunition to shoot back. Also, since the slaves and prisoners were Jews, the Zealots didn’t want to kill their own people, I guess, even though they were being forced to help the Romans.”

“Those walls looked like double walls,” Neville said. “I wouldn’t think a battering ram could get through.”

“They’re called casemate walls—outer and inner walls with space in between. The space was divided into rooms and used for living quarters and storage. Anyhow, the Romans started to break through the outer wall. The Jews reinforced it by pouring dirt between the inner and outer walls, to cushion the impact of the battering ram. They also used huge timbers and planks of wood from some of the buildings. But the Romans set fire to the wood. The wind *almost* changed direction long enough to save the Zealots, but then it changed back—blew the flames away from the Roman siege tower and back toward the inner wall.”

“Divine intervention?” Pete suggested.

Lavi answered with a fractional shrug, “Who knows? The Zealots figured time was running out. They didn’t want to be slaves or prisoners. They wanted to die as free men. So they chose to take their own lives.”

Lauren gasped. “Nine hundred and sixty-seven people committed suicide?”

“Not exactly,” Lavi went on. “Come on—let’s start back to the camp. Abdul and the others should have dinner ready.” He led the climbers back up the tiers of Herod’s hanging palace and picked up the tale. “What they did was, each man killed his own family. Kissed his wife and children good-bye, held them close”—Lavi swallowed, as if reliving that two-thou-sand-year-old agony—“then killed them. Then they drew lots to pick ten men to kill the others. Then one man to kill the other nine. The last man set fire to the palace—the big western one—and took his own life.”

The Israeli paused to let the story sink in. “The next morning the Romans battered in the wall, and they found nine hundred and sixty bodies.”

“How do we know what went on?” Lauren asked in a whisper as they walked across the open plateau toward the tents.

“Two women and five kids hid and escaped the decision to die. They told the story to the Romans, and Josephus Flavius, a historian of the time, wrote it all. All the evidence we uncovered in the digging supports the story Josephus wrote down.”

“My God, that’s horrible,” said Lauren, still hushed as if respecting the ghosts that must roam the desolate place.

“Not when you consider the alternative,” Lavi said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“What do you mean?” said Pete.

“What would the Romans have done with these Jews who’d been doing their level best to make Silva’s life as governor as difficult as possible—like we do to the Visitors? They would’ve been killed or made into slaves. Neither was any picnic. And imagine how pissed off the Romans must’ve been when they came streaming in here the next morning only to find bodies. Not exactly a satisfying end to a three-year siege. Oh, the Jews made sure to leave lots of food and supplies lying about. They wanted the Romans to know they’d died of their own volition, that they hadn’t been starved out.”

“I wonder what we’d do in that same position?” Pete wondered.

“Well,” said Lavi, “I hear some resistance groups *have* been in similar straits and some of them did what the Jewish Zealots did. Come along—I can smell the food.”

Pete and the others quickened their pace to keep up with the Israeli. “Where are we going?” Pete asked.

“In here,” Lavi replied, pointing at a solid-looking section of the old perimeter wall. He led them to an arched doorway low enough that they had to duck. A tarp had been rigged with tent poles to form an overhanging awning, under which they still had to crouch. Several of the other resistance fighters were

gathered here around three camping stoves, where a splendid smelling stew was being prepared and served on military-issue aluminum field dishes.

Lavi guided the visitors over to sit on the hard ground with Gamel and Abdul, the two Arabs they'd met upon arrival. Scattered lanterns cast enough light to make the dining area cozy.

"There's coffee, too, if you want it," Abdul said helpfully. Lauren dug into her plate of stew first, chewing the initial forkful somewhat warily. Then she licked her lips in approval. "Hey, this is good stuff. What's in it?"

Lavi waved off the question. "Ah, you don't want to know that. . . ." He held the serious expression for several beats, then grinned.

Holding the plate at arm's length, Lauren gave him a withering stare. "You're kidding, right?"

"Of course, Lauren. We've been eating this for months and we're still alive." He suddenly made a wrenching noise and fell back against the ancient mud-brick wall.

Gamel rolled his eyes. "Same stew for months, and same Israeli jokes, too. Stay dead, Lavi—spare us another show!" "So, tell me, did you enjoy the tour?" asked Abdul. Pete, Lauren, and Neville chorused their enthusiasm. "Well, Lavi," Abdul said, "you've got a much better future in the tour business than the joke business."

Pete wolfed down another mouthful of steaming stew. "How do Arabs feel living in a Jewish monument?"

"Hey, we didn't like the Romans either," Gamel said cheerfully, "no matter what everyone wrote about Cleopatra and Mark Antony."

"I don't mean to puncture your unity," Lauren said, "but back at the UN, I never saw much harmony between your three countries."

"That was B.V.—before Visitors," said Abdul. "I don't know if Lavi told you, but ever since the archeologists dug Masada out of its own rubble, the armored units of the Israeli Defense Forces take their oath up here. When they do, they swear that 'Masada shall not fall again.' That's a sentiment we can all go along

with when you apply it to the whole world.” “Besides,” Gamel said, brow furrowed seriously, “Arabs and Jews weren’t always enemies. For a couple of centuries after Mohammed founded Islam and Arab armies swept across the Middle East and North Africa, we were the major power in the world.”

“That’s right,” Abdul concurred. “Europe was entering the Dark Ages, and we Arabs kept the light of civilization burning. Our scholars not only preserved the knowledge of ancient Greece and Rome, they also formed the basis for modern mathematics. The Arab world was the center of art and trade. My homeland was the great crossroads, the place where traders from India and Asia came to sell their treasures and spices.” “They may sound like they’re blowing their own horn,” Lavi said in a stage whisper, “but every word of it is true. The Jews who used to live in Palestine got scattered through the whole region by the Romans. There were Jews all over the Arab world, as well as the squalid little villages in Europe. Since we were always moving around anyway, we became merchants. We linked the Arab and Christian worlds.”

“For two hundred years or so, under Arab rule, the Jews were allowed to practice their religion, which they *weren’t* allowed under Christian rule at the same time. And they even prospered,” Abdul said.

“Uh, mates, if things were so bloody wonderful,” Neville interrupted, “what happened?”

The Israeli traded sheepish glances with his Arab partners. “Things change,” he said ruefully. “Tides of history get pulled in different directions.”

“Hey, anybody want to play chess after dinner?” Gamel asked, changing the subject completely.

Abdul and Lavi uttered disgusted protests, leading Lauren to exclaim, “*Ah-ha!* Discord!”

“They won’t play with me anymore. How about you, Peter?”

“Sorry—never learned how.”

“I’ll teach you!”

“Don’t do it,” said Abdul.

“You’ll regret it,” Lavi warned.

“He cheats,” said Abdul.

Gamel’s irrepressible good cheer clouded for an instant. “I do not,” he protested. Then, turning his back to Pete: “Lavi doesn’t like to play because he loses all the time.”

Lavi sneered. “Yes, and you keep referring to our so-called matches as replays of the Six Day War.”

Gamel ignored that comment. “And I don’t know why Abdul refuses to play, except that members of the Saudi royal family are sore losers.”

“*Royal family?*” Pete said in surprise.

“Of *course*,” Lauren said, feeling incredibly thick skulled. “*Prince* Abdul ibn Aziz. Economics degree from Princeton. You were oil minister when we met briefly at a UN cocktail party four years ago.”

Abdul smiled. “I’m flattered you remember.”

Pete grunted, still astonished. “Then how did you wind up here?”

The Saudi prince’s smile faded. “I’m also an air force pilot and a commando by training—the Royal Air Force College in England, then further training in your country, in Georgia, Yank.”

“Oh, when he says Yank, he means the American kind, not the baseball kind,” Lavi put in. “Went to British public school as a kid. Every now and then I get the urge to call him Prince Charles instead of Abdul.”

“At any rate,” Abdul continued, “to answer your question as to how I wound up here, when the Visitors overran Riyadh, our capital, much of my family was kidnapped or murdered. Some of us escaped and went underground. We realized we had to protect as much of our oil fields as we could. That’s when we formed the Arabian Defense Force.”

“We need oil, too,” Lavi said. “Even before all this, we did buy Saudi oil, you know. So we contacted them and suggested putting ail our shoulders to the same

grindstone.”

Gamel looked up from the chessboard he was busily arranging in a pool of lantern light, obviously hopeful of finding a willing opponent. “That’s right. We all want to survive. Once we get through this, if we really want to, we can always go back to fighting about a Palestinian homeland and who really leads the Arab world and whether we still want to drive the Jews into the sea. But if we let the Visitors beat us, that’s the whole ball of wax.”

Pete sighed wistfully. “Maybe you won’t want to fight about all that anymore.”

Abdul nodded. “Maybe you’re right, Yank. Maybe we won’t. Let’s hope we get a chance to worry about it.”

The group indulged in food and companionship for another hour or so, and Prince Abdul even entertained with some pretty fair blues-harmonica music he’d learned while stationed in America’s South. But Lavi finally pointed out that they would have to rise before the sun and they really should retire for the night. Some of the resistance fighters left the confines of the between-walls dining area to sleep in the tents. Others went down to a cave. Folding army cots were brought in for Pete, Neville, and Lauren and as they were being set up, Gamel took Pete aside. The Egyptian seemed uncharacteristically shy.

“I, uh, I hope this doesn’t offend. . . . Um, when I joined the army, I was also sent to your country to train. I, uh, very much liked baseball. Before I got to America, the Yankees were the only team I had ever heard of. So I decided to be a Yankee fan while I lived there.”

Pete chuckled. “Did you get to see any games?”

“I was a tank commander, and we were trained in your deserts out west. But on my way home, we stayed in New York and *then* finally I got to your Yankee Stadium. I saw you play. When I learned to play—our instructors taught me—I played third base, so I watched very closely how you played.” Fearfully, Pete closed his eyes. “Oh, God, I hope I had a good day.”

“Well, you kicked a grounder—”

“Booted.”

“Right—*booted*.”

“Wonderful.”

Gamel clapped him on the back. “Ah, but you made three impossible throws. You also hit a home run.”

“Not so bad. then.”

“Not bad? Great! So, what I wanted, uh, to ask you is—for your autograph?”

“I’m just a doctor now, Gamel. Haven’t played for two years.”

“But you were my only real baseball hero. All that matters is that I saw you play that one game before I went home to Egypt,” Gamel said, his eyes full of the same earnest hero worship Pete had seen in so many nine-year-old boys back home.

“Well, I’d be honored to give you my autograph.”

The Egyptian appeared greatly relieved. He stood in place, smiling at Pete. Pete smiled back, waiting. Then he made a writing motion with his hand.

“Pen, Gamel?”

“Ah, do you have one?”

“Uh, yeah, sure.” Pete pulled a ballpoint out of his back pocket. “Paper?”

“Ah, do you have paper, too?”

Pete shook his head and started to laugh. “Yeah, sure, Gamel. Out in the shuttle. C’mon.”

Chapter 16

“Me? On a *camel*? *No way!*” Pete shook his head emphatically, looking like a child refusing to take medicine, mouth clamped shut in permanent resistance.

“What’s so terrible about camels?” Gamel asked. “I’ve been riding them since I was a tiny child.”

“Yeah, well, you were bom with camels.”

Gamel flared in mock anger. “I beg your pardon!”

“You know what I mean.”

Gamel shrugged mildly. “Well, that’s part of the plan. You don’t ride, you’ll have to walk.”

Abdul, Lavi, and Neville regarded Pete with bemused interest. Lauren’s look was more of a sharp probe. “What’s with you and camels?” she demanded.

He hunched defensively. “I don’t care to tell you. I’ve got my reasons.”

“This is one very weird phobia you’ve got, and one lousy time to reveal it.”

“Well, we never had to worry about camels in New York, now did we, Lauren?” he said, his voice peevish.

She stamped her foot on the hardened dirt floor of the sleeping area within the ancient battlement walls. “Peter, this is downright ridiculous. Tell me right now —”

He threw his hands up. “Okay, okay. Who cares if I’m embarrassed?”

“We don’t,” said the other five in harmony.

Pete glared. “I once took my daughters to the Bronx Zoo and they wanted to go on the camel ride. Fine. What did I know about camels? Lawrence of Arabia rode ’em, that’s good enough for me. The girls are thrilled. They think the

camels are cute. The trainer gets 'em up there, the girls are still thrilled. I go to pet the damned beast and it lets out this horrible roar and tries to *bite* me. I *don't like camels*." He noticed everyone attempting—and failing—to stifle sniggers. "Satisfied?" Abdul controlled himself enough to say, "Must have been a New York cab driver reincarnated as a camel."

"Ho, ho," Pete sneered. By now Lauren had doubled over in laughter. Pete smiled sweetly at her. "Hey, Laur—how'd you like me to tell everybody about *your* favorite phobia?" She straightened up in a hurry. "Don't you dare." "Why? I think these four men would get a real kick out of knowing that you—"

She clapped a hand over his mouth. "Well, almost time to get going. Let's go over the rest of the plan in the shuttle, en route—what do you say?"

With cooperative and conspiratorially neutral faces, the others concurred, starting to pack up the maps and charts they'd spread out for the strategy session.

With the first highlights of dawn starting to tinge the eastern sky, the Visitor shuttlecraft lifted off the top of Masada, heading toward the sunrise. They rose high over the Dead Sea, its calm surface reflecting the sky's morning glimmerings. Pete was at the controls, with Abdul ibn Aziz in the co-pilot's position.

In a few minutes they were over the barren badlands of Jordan. In the dim early light, Pete could see that except for a narrow tear-shaped section along the Jordan River Valley, King Hussein's country was mostly arid plateau. Prince Abdul told him the land got progressively more dry as it stretched to the east, toward his own country.

"The Jordanian Desert is called *hamada*. Nothing but sand interspersed with gravel and chips of flint."

"Sounds like we wouldn't want to crash there," Pete said. "Definitely not."

Soon they were over Saudi Arabia, flying quickly above vast expanses of uninhabitable sand, on a course taking them southeast.

"Hard to believe you've got people living in your country, Abdul," said Pete.

"When I've toured the desert, I've often thought the same thing, Yank. But the

whole country isn't like this."

"No?"

"Actually, some parts are worse. In the south we have a region called Ar Rab al Khali—the Empty Quarter. It's two hundred and fifty thousand square miles of sand and dunes. The wind blows the dunes every day of the year—always shifting and changing, almost as if they were alive." "Abdul, tell me something. Why has the Middle East always been a place that somebody was trying to conquer? It's not exactly the garden spot of the world."

The Saudi prince grinned. "Well, now it's because of oil, obviously. But in ancient times it was mostly because this part of the world was the path to other places. For the Romans it was the fringe of the known world, and they wanted whatever they could reach. If you sailed east on the Mediterranean, what did you hit when you reached the shore? Palestine and Lebanon. That gave you a beachhead to move inland. Later on it was the route to the exotica of India and the Far East. Then there's also the religious aspect of the place—the cradle of the three Western religions, and God knows we haven't exactly gotten along through the centuries."

"One man's devout next-door neighbor is another man's infidel," Pete quipped.

"That's right," said Abdul. "Think of all the blood that's been shed in and around the so-called Holy Land. Every age has had its own reasons for following this particular path to conquest. Now the Visitors do, too."

Pete glanced out the window and did a double take. "Is that what I think it is?"

"And what do you think it is, Yank?"

"I think it's Kansas, U.S.A. Are those fields of crops?" Abdul raised an eyebrow. "I told you it wasn't all sand. We've got oases, of course, but a lot of the money you pay us for oil has gone into massive desert reclamation projects—building irrigation canals, planting grass and trees to hold the soil, then cultivating crops. The idea is to create new lands for nomadic tribes to settle on and farm, as well as for overflow from expanding populations in the coastal cities. The Israelis aren't the only ones making the desert bloom, eh, Lavi?" "Stuff it, Your Highness!" came the good-natured reply from the aft cabin.

“All right, Yank, time for me to take over the controls,” said Abdul, peering out the front windows.

“We’re close?”

“Mm-hm. Weil be landing outside the Al Hasa oasis—the biggest oasis in the world.”

Pete swallowed uncomfortably. “That’s where you all get to torture me and make me ride that damned camel.”

“That’s right.” The Saudi turned in his seat. “All right, weil be landing in about ten minutes.”

Lauren started digging through her canvas pack. “Okay, time for Pete and Neville to put on their disguises. And I’ve got diplomatic papers and ID’s for the three of us.” She looked up at the local agents. “Are you sure you won’t need fake ID’s?” “Well,” Gamel said, “I’m staying back with the shuttle, and Lavi and Abdul should be able to act like they belong here after entire lifetimes.”

“Well, / can,” Lavi said smugly, “but Prince Charles might be more at home in London, eh?”

“Are all you Jews such wise-asses?” Abdul called over his shoulder.

“Is that what they mean by ‘Chosen People’?” Gamel deadpanned.

Lauren handed disguise kits to Pete and Neville and soon had two companions with full beards and mustaches. They peeked approvingly in a mirror and compared their images with the identification pictures in their passports.

“That’s a good print job,” Neville said, carefully examining the papers.

“It should be,” Lauren replied. “It’s the same printer who does real UN documents.”

With a gentle thud the aircraft settled down onto the dusty ground. Pete reached for the hatch release and they all clambered out. Nearby was a cluster of drab brown tents and an assortment of camels and goats bent over a small watering hole. Date palms stood in tall clusters, their stately trunks tapering as they

curved up and spread umbrellas of fronds overhead. For some distance around the watering hole, short grass grew like a carpet of green fuzz. Beyond that there were a few squares of cropland, with unidentified stalks sprouting in neat rows.

“Is this the main oasis?” asked Pete, unaccustomed to his new facial foliage and suppressing the urge to brush it away with his hand.

“No,” said Abdul. “It’s ten miles away. This is one of those new settlements I was telling you about. A1 Hasa has over a hundred thousand people, or it did before the Visitors took it over. There’s a giant bazaar there. These days, it’s probably the biggest black market in the world.”

Lavi scratched his thick hair. “Are you sure we’ll be able to avoid being picked up by the Visitors?”

“Well,” said Abdul, “you all come with me and I’ll make you look like bedouins. They travel back and forth from here to Hofuf so often, the Visitors don’t pay any attention. From there, you and I turn into local guides taking these three diplomats via rail from Hofuf to Ras Tanura, on the coast.” “No more camels?” Pete wanted to know as he walked alongside the prince.

“No, no more camels after this short ride, Yank. At Ras Tanura—that’s where most of the refineries are—we take a van north to Safaniya, where the lizards have their drilling platform.”

A fat man in native tribal robes and burnoose waddled toward them, a smile spreading his cheeks. Two gold teeth flashed inside his mouth. “Your Highness!”

Abdul greeted him with a rowdy hug. “Said, my friend! You’re looking extremely well fed considering the times.” Said lowered his head in shame. “I come by my food honestly, Your Highness.”

“I’m sure you do,” Abdul grinned, “and you’re embarrassing me calling me Highness while we don’t have a real government. So Abdul will do for now—don’t make me remind you again. Now, is everything ready?”

“Of course, just as you ordered!” He panned a slow gaze down the line of people with Abdul, grunting disdainfully. “We have to make *these* people into bedouins?”

“I know—a nearly impossible task. But I have faith in you, Said. Now, let’s hurry.”

By the time the travel party was properly clothed, Gamel had the Visitor shuttle covered with a tarp and buried in sand. He waved farewell as Abdul led his unlikely band of counterfeit nomads north toward the oasis city. A narrow ribbon of aging and sometimes crumbling blacktop made the trip somewhat easier, and it took only four hours to cover the ten miles into Hofuf, an ancient city that had maintained its character as a teeming trade mart. Like most cities in the Arab world that had endured through intermixed ages of prosperity and poverty, Hofuf was a jumble of modern high rises side by side with mosques and minarets, modern offices shadowing classic examples of Arabic architecture from centuries ago, with their domes and arched windows and entry ways.

Latterday avenues connected to alleyways too narrow for a Fiat to pass through. Within was the labyrinth of shopping arcades, with colorful overhangs shading the tumult that refused to subside just because the Visitors had taken over. The air of the alleys jangled with music and the singsong medley of merchants praising their wares.

“Where are we going?” Lauren asked as they rode up to the outskirts of the medina, the old city at the core of Hofuf.

“Just ahead.” Abdul reined his camel toward a stand of date palms. An Arab waited in the shade, with two others a couple of steps behind him. The Saudi prince dismounted and spoke quickly and quietly to the waiting men. They hustled over to help Abdul’s companions get off their own camels. On command, the animals knelt, allowing riders to hop down. Pete rubbed his rear end.

“These things’ll never replace my Mercedes,” he grumbled.

“Quickly,” Abdul ordered, stripping off his robes and headdress, emerging in street clothes. The others did the same. Pete, Lauren, and Neville were dressed casually, as befit diplomats on the road. Abdul and Lavi, posing as guides, wore simple khaki bush shirts and pants.

“Our contact is waiting in the *suqs*,” Abdul said.

“The what?” Pete asked.

“The craft quarters in the medina,” Lavi explained. “You know, the twisting alleys you see in James Bond movies when double-oh-seven is in the Middle East.”

“I didn’t know places like that still existed,” Pete said. “A few more years, they may not,” Abdul said, guiding them out of the trees to a potholed street. “Saudi Arabia’s falling prey to urban renewal, too. A lot of the medina is turning into a slum. Come on—we’d better hurry.”

“Is there some danger of the Visitors spotting us?” said Neville.

“Well, of course there is,” Abdul answered. “We’ve got no guarantees on this journey, I’m afraid. The longer we hang about, the greater the risk. Our contact’s got our travel passes and railroad tickets, and I’ll feel a damned sight better once we’re on that bloody train.”

The Visitors were a noticeable presence in Hofuf, but not as obtrusive as Pete had feared. Platoons of helmeted regulars marched here and there. Elite shock troopers guarded the local Visitor headquarters, a mosque chosen because it had open space around its perimeter, a buffer through which any attackers would have to pass. The alien commanders must have figured that a holy place, even one defiled by invaders, was probably more immune to reprisals by the natives than any other building they might use as a command post.

Mostly, the Visitors allowed the Arabs in this oasis to go about their business. They maintained a high-tension state of vigilance, but the hurly-burly of the city made it difficult to exert iron-fisted control. As a result, the resistance group picked up its train tickets without incident.

It took about two hours to cover the hundred or so miles between Hofuf and Ras Tanura, where an Arab teenager with a peach-fuzz mustache was waiting for them as they disembarked. He handed Abdul the keys to a rusty Volkswagen microbus parked nearby. Then the youthful resistance agent huddled with the prince and chattered darkly in Arabic.

“We’ve got a new fly in the ointment,” Abdul said. He pointed over the top of the train, up toward the dusky eastern sky. They all turned at the same time and saw the menacing bulk of a Visitor Mother Ship, hanging like a thunder cloud in the distance.

“He says it wasn’t here before,” Abdul explained. “It arrived while we were on the train.”

Pete scowled. “Diana’s ship? It has to be.”

“But her ship hasn’t left the California area since they came back,” said Lauren.

“Maybe she wanted to see a different desert,” Lavi said dryly.

Pete turned to Neville. “Was this part of the plan, her coming to the Middle East with her whole damned ship?” The Englishman shrugged. “It wasn’t a prerequisite. She could just as easily have thrown the switches from California.” “Shit,” Pete spat. “Let’s get going. We’ve still got a drive ahead of us.”

They climbed into the van and headed north to Safaniya. As they drove up the coastal highway, they could see the changes wrought in the six decades since the oil genie had been freed from the parched lands of the Arabian Peninsula. Compared to the sandy wastes they’d flown over to get here, the strip along the Persian Gulf could have been the vision of some developer gone mad. Massive oil-storage tanks lined the shore like great drum-shaped monuments, a modern equivalent of the Pharaohs’ pyramids.

In every direction, tall A-frame oil well derricks guarded the flat horizon, stripped-down Eiffel Towers that worked for a living. Or they *had* until the Visitors returned to Earth. Now most wells were dormant. The stacks that used to light the sky with flaring fire as they burned off excess natural gas were dark and silent, matches snuffed by alien invaders. Out in the Gulf, offshore processing plants perched on their stilts, profiles bristling with crane arms and smokestacks, all inactive. Pipelines bordered the highway, leading from terminals where supertankers would dock to inland plants and storage facilities.

It was another 150 miles to Safaniya, another three hours lost to travel. But the timing couldn’t have been better. They arrived in the last glow of twilight; darkness was ready to cover their initial reconnaissance of Visitor installations.

“Two blocks from here,” Neville said, pointing at a blacked-in square on the hand-charted map of the oil port. He and the others were inside a boarded-up storefront on a Safaniya street. They were dressed in Visitor uniforms, ready for the nighttime foray. Peter and Neville had shed their beards. “That’s the communications relay center?” asked Pete. The Englishman nodded. “Right. We

break into there, I can tell what Diana's been up to since I left her cozy starship. I can tap into their entire computer grid."

"Something you arranged, no doubt?" Lauren suggested. Neville simply smiled.

"How'd you get Diana to go along with having these facilities almost entirely run by computers?" Pete said.

"It's rather a dull tale, mate. They've got a manpower—er, *lizardpower*—shortage. This way, they just need a handful of technical types, and Diana gets to throw the switches from her very own bridge."

"Which suited her liking to be in charge," Pete said. "Right. And it suited my needs. I guaranteed my own access to the system with a few well-hidden passwords, just in case Diana crossed me. Which is what she's done."

Lavi cracked his knuckles as he sat on one of the wooden crates that were the storefront's main furnishings. "I still don't like it."

Neville looked annoyed at being questioned. "It'll work, believe me."

"I'm just not used to doing something like this without lots of explosives."

Abdul shook his head ruefully. "You'll have to forgive him—he's partial to blowing things up."

"Simple but effective," Lavi shrugged modestly.

"And terribly noisy," Neville reminded them. "Not to mention unnecessary, at least in this case."

"Fine—you're calling the shots," said Pete. "But Lauren and I are in charge. Now, how many Visitors can we expect to run into in this communications center?"

"Oh, I'd say perhaps Tour or five. No more than that."

The five resistance fighters moved quickly through the shadows of Safaniya's deserted streets. Their immediate target was a small one-story building constructed of white concrete slabs. It was surrounded by a twelve-foot-high

chain-link fence topped with snarls of barbed wire.

“First obstacle,” Neville said. “It’s electrified.”

Lavi squatted on the pavement and reached into his black nylon tote bag. “No problem.” He removed an electronic device the size of a deck of cards. A pair of rubber-coated alligator clips snaked out of one end. “Somebody got the wire cutters ready?”

Abdul answered by holding the cutters up.

The Israeli carefully gripped the pincers and clipped them to the fence. Then he twisted a dial on the little electronic box. Sparks flared at the connection points and then were gone. “Okay, the fence is neutralized.”

“What if that thing falls off?” Peter asked.

“Then the fence current goes back on. I’ll stay here to make sure nothing happens while you all go inside. Go ahead—cut, Abdul.”

With a few deft snips, the Saudi had cut a doorway and rolled the mesh back. Pete, Lauren, and Neville slipped through. Abdul followed. “Don’t take all night!” Lavi hissed after them.

With quick strides, the quartet proceeded to the steel doors of the low building, bolted by a computerized security mechanism. Neville pulled a coded plastic card from his uniform pocket and inserted it into the slot. The lock blinked the Visitor color sequence of red, purple, and blue. Neville yanked the door open and waved the others in.

Crouched over the device hanging on the fence, Lavi heard footsteps behind him, then a voice.

“Find something, Lieutenant?”

Lavi straightened slowly, starting a deliberate half turn. “As a matter of fact—”

He finished his sentence by shooting the approaching Visitor square in the chest with the laser pistol at his hip. The alien, his scaly natural face visible, dropped instantly.

Lavi regarded him with open annoyance. “Can’t leave you lying around. *Shouldn’t* leave the current neutralizes Ah, let’s go, lizzie. ...”

Holstering his laser, the Israeli draped the dead alien over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry and hauled him to a pair of dumpsters. He shoved the body in between the two, where it wouldn’t be seen. Then he hurried back to the fence and glanced at his watch.

“This way,” Neville instructed, leading them down a featureless cinder-block corridor.

“What was this before it was borrowed by Diana?” said Lauren.

“A control facility for tanker traffic coming in and out of this port.” Neville slowed as he spotted a Visitor at a security desk at the junction of two hallways. This alien was also without his human mask. His hat was off and he was scratching his skull crest with one green-scaled finger. Motioning for the others to stay back around a corner, Neville walked up to the security guard. The guard cradled his laser gun protectively.

“Commander,” the alien addressed Neville. “Isn’t it late to be here? I thought everyone had returned to the Mother Ship.”

“They did. I came back to check on a few things. It won’t be long now, eh, Lieutenant?”

“No, sir.”

“At any rate, I heard a noise from the main relay room. I was wondering if you had the key so I could check it out?”

“Yes, sir.” The Visitor reached into his uniform and produced a crystalline blade with notches chipped into it. He followed Neville, who then stepped back as they neared the corner and let the alien go ahead. Pete suddenly stepped out in the Visitor’s path and delivered a two-handed roundhouse clout to the jaw. As the guard went down, Neville added a sweeping kick to the chest, then finished the job with a pistol butt to the back of the head.

“A little brutal there,” said Lauren, showing her distaste for excessive violence.

“Gets the job done.” Neville snatched the sparkling key from the unconscious guard’s hand and slid it into the relay room’s lock. The door opened. Neville and Abdul dragged the Visitor in after them.

“I take it this door is a little Visitor addition?” the prince said.

Neville nodded. “You know what happens when every Tom, Dick, and Neville gets his hands on the key.”

Lauren hung back in the doorway. “You guys take care of this. I’ll take his guard post in case someone else comes by. It’ll look pretty suspicious if they notice a missing guard.” Pete nodded. “Be careful.”

“I’ll be careful—you be *quick*.”

Neville was already at a computer terminal when Pete turned in and shut the door behind him. He and Abdul hovered over the Englishman’s shoulders as Neville’s slender fingers raced over the keyboard, pausing, then flicking the keys again. He sat back and watched alien lettering appear on the CRT. With a deep breath, he cleared the screen and shut off the computer. “Well?” Pete prompted.

“Bad news.”

“We’re not too late, are we?” said Abdul.

Neville shook his head. “No, but Diana’s figured out the key. They’re ready to start the injection process here at Safaniya tonight.” He looked at his watch. “We’ve got about two hours. And that *was* her ship up there—here to supervise in person.”

“Is that gonna be enough time?” said Pete.

“Don’t know, mate. But if we’re going to have any chance at all, we’ve got to get cracking.”

Pete and Abdul started for the door first, then skidded to a halt at the sound of a laser pistol behind them. They turned and saw that Neville had shot the Visitor guard.

“Bloody bastard.” Neville flexed his eyebrows. “Couldn’t very well leave him

alive to call in a report as soon as he comes to. Don't look so concerned—just a lizard. He'd do the same to us given half a chance, eh?"

They rushed out, beckoned to Lauren, and headed for the front door. Pausing briefly before crossing the compound, they saw no one around except Lavi out at the fence. As they drew near, the Israeli held the flap of fencing open for them and they climbed through. Then he detached the neutralization device and shoved it into his bag.

"So?"

"We've got two hours to stop that thing," Pete said gravely.

Out in the harbor, the Visitor drilling platform waited in brooding silence.

They retreated to their storefront hiding place to go over the plan once more, but Neville interrupted.

"There's going to be a minor change," he announced. Pete crossed his arms.

"Oh, and what's that?"

"I go out to the platform alone."

There was a quiet moment as what he said sank in, then the protests exploded.

Pete waved his hands for attention. "Shut up. Diana'll be able to hear us all the way up to her ship. Now, what the hell are you babbling about, More?"

"I'm not babbling, Forsythe. I'm going alone, and that's final. If I don't, this mission will fail."

"How do you figure that?"

"Quite simple, actually. The security-clearance system I designed for the drilling platform is a hundred times more complex and exacting than the facility we just broke into. I can't just waltz you all in with a little credit card. The program is primed to let me in with the proper password—but *only* me. To get anyone else in would be a difficult and time-consuming piece of business. We don't have that kind of time."

Pete pounded one fist into the other palm. “Dammit. How the hell do you expect me to let you go up there alone? How are we supposed to know what you do in there?”

“You don’t have any choice, Forsythe.”

“The man has a point there, Yank,” said Abdul.

Lauren took an aggressive stance, hands on hips. “What exactly *will* you be doing, Neville?”

“Activating a pair of cleverly concealed computer viruses. ” “A pair?” Lauren asked.

He nodded. “Yes, yes—don’t you see? If we simply stop Diana this time, she’ll just try it again another day, maybe another place.”

“You have some way of preventing a repeat performance?” said Pete.

“I pride myself on staying one step ahead of my friends, Forsythe. You never know when they may turn out to be your enemies.”

“Okay, so what’re you gonna do?” Pete prodded.

“The first virus wipes out the program that actually controls the injection of the oil-tainting bacteria into the underground deposit. The second goes all the way back into the Visitors’ entire computer memory—every single bank through the entire fleet—and wipes out every entry that has anything to do with the bacteria’s design and production. It’ll take them months to recreate all the research.”

Abdul was impressed. “Months? Really?”

“Yes, yes!” Neville was extremely emphatic. “This wasn’t some high school science project. Designing a form of life from scratch is a terribly complicated bit of work. And I know for a fact that these high-tech lizards don’t write in notebooks. Every scrap of data on something as top secret as this goes directly into the computer system.”

“You’re sure all this’ll work?” said Pete.

“Of course I’m sure.” Righteous indignation colored Neville’s reply. “But it’s going to take me a little time to trigger the viruses. I can’t waste it getting you in with me so you can drool over my shoulder.”

Pete looked to Lauren, who gave a half-hearted shrug. “The President said we were in charge,” she said. “Trusted us to make the last-minute decisions. I’d say Neville’s made this one for us.”

Pete walked over to the Englishman and stood toe to toe. “If you’re lying, if you screw us, I’ll personally dismantle you bone by bone. I’m a doctor—I know just how many parts to remove.”

Neville flashed a one-second smile. “I’ll do my job, mate. You all do yours and get me out to that rig.”

Lauren and Lavi waited in the VW van, parked between two buildings near the docks. Still in Visitor dress, Pete, Abdul, and Neville climbed down a rope ladder to an inflatable Zodiac launch left in the water for them by one of Abdul’s local resistance members. The Zodiac bobbed between the pier pilings and the black steel flank of a freighter’s hull, thus hidden from any Visitors who might be surveying the area. Pete untied the mooring line and pushed away while Abdul watched the other side to keep from bumping into the freighter.

The boat had a small outboard motor engine mounted at its stem, but they paddled partway to avoid making noise. The alien rig was about a half mile out in the Gulf’s glassy waters.

“You’re sure there’s nobody aboard that platform?” Pete said, switching the motor on when they were far enough out.

“There shouldn’t be,” Neville answered. “It was designed to be operated completely from the Mother Ship. You know, I’m actually surprised they’re starting so soon. I didn’t think they’d be ready for days.”

The Visitors platform looked much like the other rigs constructed in the shallow shore-hugging areas of the Gulf, but it was considerably smaller, with just two fifty-foot-wide tablelike sections standing in the water. Boxy modules sat on each platform, with the tower supporting the drill itself mounted in the center. Pete attributed the less complex design to the fact that the Visitors weren’t pumping oil out, just pumping bacteria in.

The Zodiac drifted close to the rig's southwest leg, which had rungs built into it. Abdul, at the front of the boat, grabbed on and managed to swing alongside the foot of the ladder. Neville started to stand up, then thought better of it when he nearly pitched overside. On hands and knees, he reached for the bottom rail and pulled himself up.

"We'll wait for you," Peter said.

Neville began his climb. "No. Don't wait. I'll signal you when I'm nearly done. If anything goes wrong, no point in all of us becoming Diana's breakfast."

"Don't take any stupid chances."

Neville grinned. "I'm a practical man, Forsythe. You should know that by now."

"Good luck," Abdul called as Neville continued up the ladder without a look back. When he'd reached the top and disappeared over the edge, the Saudi pushed away and he and Pete motored back toward shore.

Chapter 17

With a grunt, Neville hauled himself up onto the platform. He kneeled to catch his breath, noting how dark it was here in the middle of the Persian Gulf. Diana had considered the possibility of overt human attack, as the unfortunate Israeli Air Force squadron had discovered. *But one man in a rubber raft?* thought Neville with great satisfaction. He'd convinced her the internal security of a fail-safe computer program would protect against any such foolhardy individual.

"And it would have, too," Neville murmured. "Anybody but me."

Keeping low, he scurried across the open deck to the larger of the two equipment modules. It was constructed from a dull-surfaced alien alloy, the combination of metals forming a lightweight armor plating virtually impervious to anything humans might shoot at it. Neville recalled Lavi Mayer's desire to use explosives—wouldn't have done a bit of good. The only weapon able to penetrate this armor was Neville's mind.

He searched along the structure's north wall until he found a small access hatch cleverly concealed, its edge blending into the seams of the wall itself. He opened it to reveal a compact computer terminal much like the one that had guarded the isolation chamber where they'd found Hannah Donnenfeld in the Mother Ship.

"All right, listen to Papa," Neville trilled softly. Eyes closed, he shuffled through his memory for the series of codes he'd need simply to open the door and get inside where the main computer was located.

Lauren leaned on the Volkswagen's steering wheel. Lavi sat in the passenger seat next to her, his feet wedged against the dashboard, wrist propped on his knees, sleeve pulled back so he could see his watch.

"Want to know how much time left, Lauren?"

"Not really." Her head never turned.

"Sixty-five minutes."

“Why did you bother to ask?”

“Just trying to be polite.”

“But you ignored my answer.”

He shrugged casually. “You gave me the wrong answer.”

The Zodiac rose and fell in rhythm with the swells lapping at the pier. Pete sat stiffly on the center bench, binoculars seemingly attached to the bridge of his nose. Abdul lounged behind him, legs draped over a seat slat, back flat on the boat’s flexible bottom, head leaning on the round side wall.

“Hey, Yank, if you keep that up, your arms will lock at the elbows.”

“Don’t tell me—a watched Neville never boils.”

“What are you looking at?”

“The rig.”

“And what’s it doing?”

“Nothing.”

“Seems like a boring hobby then, wouldn’t you say?” Pete chuckled. “Reminds me of the one time I went bird-watching.”

“Well, let’s hope this is the only time we have to rig-watch.”

“Dammit, I wish I could see him.”

The prince yawned. “If you could see him, that would mean one of the following: he was already done, which would be smashing but unlikely, or he couldn’t get in, or he was paralyzed with fright and hadn’t budged since we left him there.”

“I guess you’re right, Abdul.”

“Does that mean you’re going to stop?”

“Nope.”

Neville found perspiration beading on his brow, despite the relatively cool night. He used his sleeve to wipe the sweat away before it dripped into his eye, the way it did when he played tennis on a sultry day. He hated that salty sting. “Okay, mate. Last number now. ...”

He tapped the miniature keyboard. The indicator light above it blinked to life, then flashed in sequence—red, purple, blue. He heard an electrical hum issuing from the panel. Then the outline of a person-sized entry hatch became visible where none could be seen a moment before as a portion of the alloy wall literally edged forward, moving two inches out from the surrounding surface. He could hear the whirring of hydraulics, and the door slid aside, uncovering a narrow entry space. He sucked in a last breath of night air, then darted into the module.

It was totally dark inside. He fumbled for the pencil flashlight he’d slipped into a pocket. *Which pocket? Hands are jittery, mate. Calm yourself. . . . Must have at least—* Neville glanced at his lighted wristwatch, then swallowed nervously. “Fifty minutes left,” he said out loud, surprised to find that much time had gone by.

Moving with purposeful resolve, he stepped directly to the computer console across the dark chamber. Even the computer seemed deep in slumber, its electronic face of indicator lights off, its CRT blank. He slid down into the molded chair, stretched, took a deep breath, and roused the machine. In an all-finger assault, he typed a flurry of commands and information, filling the screen with alien words and numbers. His shoulders hunched, face bright with his own intensity as well as the reflected glow of the CRT, Neville directed the computer like a symphony conductor caught up in the passion of his music. His motions accelerated to a near frenzy, corners of his mouth turning up progressively until the faintest of sly smiles had erupted into a full-voiced cackle of victory.

With a splendid flourish, he stabbed the keyboard one last time. The screen came ablaze with letters dancing from one side to the other, then abruptly went black.

Neville held his breath for a few endless seconds, eyes wide.

At the center of the computer screen, a single Visitor word appeared, one letter at a time. Seven letters. The word began to flash like a beacon and Neville More pumped a triumphant fist over his head.

“That’s it—you’re all mine!”

Reclining in her favorite lounge chair, Diana unconsciously tapped her foot to the stirring martial cadences of music by Wagner, the German composer. One of her staff had thoughtfully given her the tape. To her surprise, Diana had actually found it enjoyable, even inspiring.

A discordant chiming interrupted, and Diana reached for her intercom.

“I left instructions not to be disturbed unless an emergency arose. This better *be* an emergency, Ilene.”

The frightened face of a young officer appeared on Diana’s screen. “It is, Commander,” Ilene said quickly, running trembling fingers through her curly hair.

“Well, what is it?”

“We’ve detected tampering at the Persian Gulf facility.”

“Status!” Diana barked as she stalked onto the bridge.

Ilene’s slender face reflected her anxiety at coping with an angry superior.

“We’re still trying to ascertain exactly what’s wrong down there, Commander.”

Diana snapped around toward the female reptilian at the communications station.

“Summon Lydia to the bridge immediately.”

“She’s already on her way.

The hatch swished open and the blond security chief strode in, giving Diana her most arrogant half smile. “Another one of your plans about to go awry, Diana dear?”

Diana’s only answer was a threatening flash in her eyes before turning back to Ilene, the ruffled computer tech. “Well?” she demanded.

Ilene chewed her lower lip as she tapped commands into the console, commands the machine seemed bent on disregarding. “I’m sorry, Diana. . . . The system won’t respond.”

“Is it operative, or has it been destroyed?”

“No, no, it’s still on line.”

“Then we have no choice. Order it to start bacterial injection into the pipeline,” Diana said. *“Immediately.”*

Ilene did as she was told, then moaned to herself when the computer refused to cooperate. The young tech tried again, obviously hoping to avoid reporting another failure to Diana. But the commander’s patience was gone.

“It’s not working, Ilene—is it?”

“No, Commander. It’s being overridden at the source. I don’t under—”

Diana was no longer listening. “Lydia, have my shuttle prepared for immediate launch.”

“You’re going down there?” Lydia was perceptibly hesitant. “This is precisely why I ordered us to reposition over the Middle East. In case something went wrong, I’d be able to personally take command. Any objections, darling?” Diana said in a stinging voice.

“Just that it could be dangerous. You should delegate the task—”

“I’m touched by your concern. Is there something specific you’d care to tell me about?”

“No. Just general caution.”

“Well, Lydia, since you are security chief, I’ll feel much safer if you come with me.”

Lydia stiffened. “Risk both our lives? I think I should stay aboard in case—”

“I’m not asking. I’m ordering.” Diana turned and moved toward the exit.

Her face drained of expression, Lydia followed.

“Surgeon to Ferryman, Surgeon to Ferryman, come in,” Neville said into his small walkie-talkie.

After a short crackle of static, Pete answered, "Come in, Surgeon. Ready for pickup?"

"Negative. First operation's a success. Diana tried to start bacterial injection and failed. I beat her to the punch." "Don't sound so happy," said Pete. "That means they know something's up. They're probably on their way down right now. Let us come and get you."

"No! I've got to erase the system memories."

"Neville, don't be an idiot," Pete growled. "You don't have time for heroics."

"this has nothing to do with heroics, Forsythe. I want my full measure of revenge on Diana. And you're not going to cheat me of that. I've got no time left for chitchat. I'll call you when I'm done. Out."

With that, Neville closed the transmission channel and tossed the two-way radio onto the floor. He went back to work on the computer keyboard and ignored Pete's voice squawking from the speaker: "Neville . . . Neville . . . come in, you shithead! *Come in!*"

"Goddamn him!" Pete snapped.

Abdul sat up in the rocking Zodiac. "What are you going to do about it, Yank?"

"We're gonna go get him, that's what."

Abdul leaned forward to grab the paddle, but Pete stopped him.

"Forget that—start the motor. We don't have time for caution."

Diana swept into the docking bay with Lydia and two sturdy security troopers in tow. They moved directly to the waiting command shuttle and boarded it, Diana taking the pilot's seat. She noticed Lydia's continuing discomfort. "Certain you don't have anything to tell me?"

"I said what I had to say, Diana. If there's danger, junior officers should be sent to reconnoiter, not command personnel."

Diana fired up the shuttle's maneuvering thrusters. "Commanders take

responsibility, Lydia.”

The blond officer had no comment. Diana accelerated out the hangar port and banked the small craft steeply as they flew down along the Saudi Arabian coastline.

The Zodiac’s little outboard labored against the Gulf’s currents. Abdul kept correcting for the drift by angling the rudder handle. Pete had a radio transmitter at his lips.

“Neville, you son of a bitch, we’re on our way. Estimate arrival in three minutes. Get the hell out of there and be ready.

No time for waiting around for you to satisfy your goddamned ego.”

“Uh, Yank,” Abdul said from the back of the launch. “I think we’ve got some additional company.”

“Huh?”

“Look up, about three o’clock.”

With a quick mental alignment, Pete looked over his right shoulder, up into the dark southern sky. There was no mistaking it. The duckbilled, pod-shaped form of a Visitor shuttle was approaching at high speed, swinging wide around the drilling rig.

“Diana?” Pete wondered.

“Who else?” There was a silent pause as they both considered the implications. Abdul spoke first. “We keep going, we could be her first target.”

Pete grunted in acknowledgment. “We turn around, Neville’s defed.”

“You’re in charge, Yank.”

With gritted teeth, Pete was disturbed to sift his own thoughts and find he was thinking, *After what he did, why risk our lives for Neville More?*

Lavi Mayer glanced aimlessly out the van’s side window. Something, some

shadowy shape overhead caught his eye and he sat upright.

“What’s wrong?” Lauren whispered, her voice thick with fatigue.

But Lavi didn’t reply. Instead, he slowly opened the VW’s door and stood on the lower sill for a better view. Lauren leaned over his seat, trying to glimpse what he saw. She couldn’t, so she got out on her own side and walked around to where he stood, his elbows on top of the door.

“Trouble, Lauren.”

She rubbed her eyes, trying to sharpen her vision. Then she saw it, too—the Visitor shuttle circling the Gulf port.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Pete and Abdul are out in open water.”

Lauren and her Israeli companion looked at each other, faces clouded by the realization there was nothing they could do. Whatever was about to happen, they would only be spectators.

* * *

Lydia adjusted the ground scanner. Something had attracted her attention and she narrowed the field. Her eyes revealed a flicker of satisfaction. “Diana.”

“What have we here?” Diana scrutinized the schematic grid displayed on the control panel screen. Her practiced fingers keyed the computer to a higher magnification, then switched to an actual visual analog—two people in a small boat scudding across the surface of the Persian Gulf below the Visitor aircraft. “Triangulate and track, Lydia.”

Lydia reached for the keyboard, tapping in the appropriate commands. “Tracking, Commander. Obviously, they’re with the resistance,” she said, an accusatory hardness in her tone. “Now you know where your trusted aide Neville More went when he absconded with Dr. Donnenfeld under his arm.”

It was Diana’s turn to squirm now, and Lydia pressed her advantage. “Would you care to bet on whether More is on that platform right now? He’s the only one who’d be able to break the security system. After all, he did create it. You gave him every chance he needed to sabotage your precious project. I warned you not

to trust a human traitor.”

“I didn’t trust him,” Diana snarled. “I don’t trust *anyone*— least of all you. If he’s down there, I’ll have the last word. But first ...”

“Oh, shit.” A chill made Pete shiver. No question about it—this was cold, solid fear. As the Zodiac held on course for the offshore drilling rig, the intruding alien ship was diving right for *them*.

“Abdul, do something!”

“Hold on, Yank.” The Arab prince jerked the tiller as far to starboard as it would go. The inflatable craft bucked as it broadsided a rising swell, then heeled over so violently it seemed certain to roll. The shuttle loosed a volley of laser bolts that sizzled the water where the Zodiac would have been had it not changed direction so sharply.

All Pete could do was grasp the straps attached to the boat’s rubbery side walls and hold on for the ride. The rest was up to Abdul’s panic navigating. The Zodiac shuddered as it was forced to skip across its own wake. Abdul threw it into a serpentine pattern of desperate turns, and Pete’s stomach heaved with every gut-tossing swerve. But he noticed his partner was aiming for the safe haven of land.

Up above them their hunter was making a second pass.

“Mother Ship to command shuttle—*urgent!*”

The quavering voice of Ilene, the young computer officer, blurted from the speaker. Diana was intent on her next strafing attack and Lydia took the call.

“Shuttle here. What—”

Ilene cut her off. “We have a red alert—critical computer malfunction.”

Diana could hear the alarm klaxon sounding in the background and she veered off her intended assault.

Braced in the bottom of the boat to keep from being pitched overboard, Pete peered wonderingly toward the sky as the enemy ship whipped past them

without firing a shot. “I don’t get it.”

“Neither do I,” said Abdul. “And I don’t care.”

“Let’s swing back—”

“Are you bonkers!” Abdul screamed. “There’s not a bloody thing we can do for him, Pete.”

With that, Abdul straightened their heading and the Zodiac raced toward shore.

Diana’s face was taut with frustration. “Status, Lieutenant. ”

“We have—we have a complete memory breakdown in the science data banks, Commander,” Ilene radioed. “We can’t stop it, and it’s spreading to other banks. If we don’t take immediate action, we project the malfunction will destroy *all* systems memories and programming throughout the entire fleet.”

Diana looked to her second in command. “Analysis confirmed, Diana. All our shipboard computers are linked. The only chance to halt the spread is to purge all science banks and totally disconnect them from the rest of the system.”

“That means we’ll lose all science data.”

“Now, Diana. ” There was no pleasure in Lydia’s voice. This was a shared defeat.

Diana pounded her clenched fist on the control panel. “Purge science banks, Uene,” she hissed. “Cut them off *now*.” She took a deep breath, a growl rolling savagely in her throat. “I want Neville More.”

As Diana dipped the shuttle’s nose for an attack on the drilling platform, Lydia swiftly pecked at the computer keyboard. “It’s too late, Diana.” A single phrase appeared on the readout screen: **platform sequence d engaged**. Then, numbers: —10—9—8—

“Diana, you’ve got to pull up!”

“What are you talking about? He’s down there.”

“No time to explain.” Lydia’s tongue flickered across her lips nervously.

The silent count: —4—3—

Lydia wrenched the steering control from Diana’s hands and sheered out of their dive. The shuttle’s frame moaned in metallic protest and the engines whined under the strain of an emergency climb nearly straight up. G-forces pinned them back into their seats.

Behind them, the Gulf rig exploded, rocketing shards of metal and a rippling fireball high into the night sky.

The shock wave slammed into the fleeing Zodiac, and Abdul wrestled the engine tiller with all his weight. Flaming debris arced through the sky, changing darkness to daylight, and the churning water sent out concentric circles of turbulence that hit the launch just as Abdul was slowing down to negotiate the tight space between the pier and the freighter. The Zodiac pitched a bit, but Pete managed to grab the piling and hook the anchor rope around it. He was already scrambling up the hanging ladder as Abdul cut the outboard motor. When he got to the top, he swung a hand down to pull the Saudi up the last couple of rungs.

Secondary blasts continued out at the platform, which was a fiery skeleton now. Taking one final look back, Pete and Abdul sprinted for the van. Lauren spotted them, started the engine, and was already rolling when they leaped through the open side doors on the run.

* * *

Like a bird of prey returning to its nest with empty talons, Diana’s shuttle swooped toward the Mother Ship.

“Don’t worry,” Lydia insisted. “I’m sure Neville More is quite dead. He had to be on the platform at the time we noticed his tampering. That boat was heading out when you shot at it, no doubt on its way to pick up More. It never got there. But he might be alive if *I* hadn’t taken precautions.”

Diana continued looking straight ahead, her darkly beautiful human face glowering. “ *What* precautions? I want an explanation, Lydia.”

Lydia smiled, not bothering to hide her gloating. “I didn’t trust Neville, and you

wouldn't heed my warnings. So I had no choice but to act on my own. I programmed an automatic destruct sequence into the platform's circuitry. It was set to engage if cut off from the main computer system."

"By not informing me, you've committed a breach of regulations possibly punishable by execution, Lydia. The Leader will want—"

"Will want to know how you allowed a human spy to become privy to our most classified computer secrets."

The two alien women glared at each other in meaningful silence. A wordless bargain had been struck once again, in the interests of self-preservation.

"There's something I'd like to know," Diana said. "If I hadn't brought you with me, the destruct sequence would have been activated anyway, wouldn't it?" It was not a question. "Of course. For the good of the fleet and our mission." "Possibly killing me in the process."

Lydia gave a partial nod. "Possibly. Every victory has its price, Diana. I'd have recommended you for a medal." She paused for effect. "Posthumously."

EPILOGUE

Cutting across two lanes of honking traffic, the battle-scarred taxi screeched to a stop at the corner of River Avenue and East 161st Street, alongside Yankee Stadium. The old Bronx ball park's white concrete hide gleamed in pristine autumn sunshine.

Lauren Stewart got out of the cab while her father paid the driver. Shafts of brilliant light filtered down through the ancient cantilevered tracks of the elevated subway line high over the street. The beams flickered as a train clattered past like a graffiti-skinned dinosaur creeping toward extinction.

Dr. George Stewart slammed the taxi door and tugged at his daughter's arm. "Come on, honey, we'll miss the beginning of the game."

As they started toward the stadium entrance, they heard a car horn beep and saw the President's limousine pull over to the curb at the spot just vacated by the cab. They traded nonplussed glances, then burst out laughing when the chauffeur hurried around to open the long rear door, only to be waved off by the spindly arm of the irascible Hannah Donnenfeld. Her Red Sox cap was clutched firmly in hand.

"Tell President Morrow thanks for the lift," she called as she caught up to the Stewarts with a sprightly step. She was wearing her Yankees warm-up jacket.

"Hannah, what the devil are you doing with the presidential limo?" George Stewart demanded.

"I had to stop off and give him an updated report on our work. Then I told him he was making me late for the ball game, so he sent me over in his car. Nice young fella, that Bill Morrow. Anyhow, let's get a move on. Game's almost starting." She marched ahead and the Stewarts trotted along, trying to keep up.

"You look like you're fully recovered," Lauren said cheerfully as they passed through the stadium turnstile.

"Yep." Hannah reached into her windbreaker and slipped something out,

wrapped in a blue velvet cover. She held it as stealthily as a street vendor displaying a hot wristwatch. Then she cleared her throat. “Got something to show you both,” she said sotto voce.

They stopped on the ramp leading up to the field-level seats, and Hannah looked both ways before unveiling the item cupped in her hands. It was a bronze medal attached to a red, white, and blue ribbon, and it bore the presidential seal.

“What, did you find that in the limo?” George Stewart asked caustically.

“I *beg* your pardon!” Hannah was righteously indignant. “President Morrow gave this to me for standing up to ol’ lizard-lips Diana. He wanted t’ have a whole big ceremony, but I told him to hell with that, I’d just take the medal on the spot. ”

George guffawed. “I’ll bet you did, too.”

“*Course* I did.”

Lauren touched the relief casting of the eagle. “Wow, Daddy, this is really something,” she said reverently.

“*Course* it is,” George asserted, echoing Hannah’s New England accent.

Holding it up, Lauren read the inscription on the back. “ ‘To Dr. Hannah Donnenfeld, for wartime bravery . . .’ I can’t wait for everyone to hear about this!”

“Ah, Lauren, I’d just as soon nobody else knew. Don’t make a big deal, huh?”

George Stewart frowned. “Are you crazy, Hannah? This *is* a big deal.”

She snatched the medal, re wrapped it, and stuffed it back into hiding inside her jacket. “I didn’t exactly volunteer to visit Diana, y’know. I told the President that, but he said it’d be impolite not to take the medal, and I’m the only Hannah Donnenfeld he knows, so who the hell else could he give it to?”

Lauren looked distinctly disappointed. “So what *are* you going to do with it?”

“Oh, I’ll keep it in a safe place,” Hannah said consideringly. “Then when the

kids at the lab give me a hard time, I'll flash it at 'em and tell 'em they better listen to me 'cause I'm a presidential medal-winner. *That'll* impress the hell out of 'em." Her chuckle was self-mocking.

They heard cheering coming from inside the ball park, and they hurried up the last ramp and out the accessway leading to the stands. The voice of the public-address announcer resonated off the walls of the cavernous arena, which was about half filled. By now, Lauren knew that meant about 25,000 fans attending. Keeping company with Peter Forsythe, she'd learned more than she ever thought possible about baseball lore.

She'd also been to enough of the makeshift league's games with Pete to know the location of his box, down in the front row at the home-plate side of the Yankee dugout. She led the way and they found Sari, Mitchell, and Denise Daltrey already seated and supplied with hot dogs, Cracker Jacks, and beer in paper cups.

"Where've you all been?" said Denise. "We thought you were going to miss the game."

"Cab got caught in traffic," George explained. "Speaking of missing the game, where's Pete? Off getting more food?" "No, no," Sari said, making an effort to be cool. "He'll, uh, he'll be here any time now."

Out on the field the announcer had been introducing the players in today's lineup. The opposing team was already out, queued along the third-base line. The home team, largely made up of Yankee team members who lived in the metropolitan area, was nearly complete.

"Next, playing shortstop for the Yankees as a change of pace, that great young long-ball hitter, Joey Vitaleeee!" The PA voice echoed in warm harmony with wild applause for Joey.

The group in Pete's box stomped loudly for their friend and sometime resistance comrade.

With a few lanky strides, Joey loped out to join his teammates, tipping his hat and flashing his charmingly lopsided grin. Several teenage girls in the next box screamed in glee as Joey turned their way, warm brown eyes seeming to look right at them. Lauren smiled to herself. With his wavy dark hair and rugged

features, he was still a heartthrob.

George Stewart sighed. “Been a long time since the girls swooned over me like that, honey.”

Lauren rested her head on her father’s shoulder. “You’ll always have that effect on me, Daddy.” She watched the love-struck teens for another minute. “Too bad they don’t know Joey’s back with that cute little girl who lives next door to his parents in Brooklyn.”

“Why ruin their fantasy?”

Sitting up again, Lauren frowned. “Speaking of fantasies, where *is* Peter?”

“Don’t worry,” Mitchell said. “He’ll be here.”

“Is something going on here that I should know about?” asked Lauren suspiciously.

Now it was Denise’s turn. “Of course not.”

George turned to Hannah. “You said you had an updated report for Morrow. Anything you can tell us?”

“Oh, sure. Well, where to start. . . . First, from fifth-column messages, it looks like Neville got his full measure of revenge. The Visitor’s entire science data banks were wiped clean, including every shred on that nasty little oil bacterium. There was also quite a bit of damage to their other computer memories.”

“Do you think they’ll be able to reconstruct the oil bacteria?” said Lauren.

Hannah gave a dubious tilt of the head. “More’n likely, but it’ll probably take months. And now that they’ve lost the element of surprise, they may not bother.” She chortled and her eyes crinkled in delight. “Yessiree, ol’ Neville certainly did a job on the lizards. I guess he wasn’t so bad after all.” Sari made a sour face. “For a slime-bucket.”

Hannah threw her hands up. “Oh, the best news of all!

We’re mighty close to coming up with a counteragent for that oil scum, so even

if the Visitors do try again, we probably won't have to worry."

Mitchell raised a pedantic finger. "And I am working out ways to guard against any more computer viruses."

"Speaking of viruses," Lauren said archly, "*where* is Dr. Forsythe?"

Out on the field the players, still arrayed along the baselines, were shifting uncomfortably, turned every which way, kicking at pebbles. The fans were getting restless, too, and a group in the upper deck began a rhythmic clap of disapproval.

"*Ladies and gentlemen,*" said the PA announcer. "*Sorry for the delay. We have a very special guest player today, someone you haven't seen in a Yankees uniform for a long time now.*" Lauren's mouth dropped open in dawning revelation. "I think I know where Pete is." She stood up and leaned over the railing, trying to crane a peek past the roof and wall of the dugout. But the angle was impossible.

"You're gonna fall out, girl," George quipped, snagging the waistband of her jeans and yanking her back into her seat.

"Hey, Daddy," she said, pouting. "I never saw Pete in his baseball suit. I didn't know he could still fit into it. Come to think of it, maybe that's what took him so long."

"Ooo, that's mean," Sari said. "Besides, I think Pete's got cute buns."

"We agree on *that*," Lauren laughed.

"*So as you can see,*" the announcer continued, still not saying the player's name, "*he's been pretty busy. Now here he is, wearing his old number eleven, resistance hero, doctor, and ten-time American League all-star, nine-time Golden Glove, two-time MVP— Peeeeete Forsyyyyythe!*"

With an audience reflex that probably dated back to the arenas of the ancient Greeks, everyone in the stadium stood and cheered. Then the cheering suddenly turned to astonished laughter. Lauren and the others in Pete's box still couldn't see him, but the players on the field were doubled over in hysterics. Joey Vitale was laughing so hard he nearly fell, but he managed to stumble toward the Yankee bench.

“Well, folks,” said the announcer, barely controlling his own laughter, “seems Pete’s been away for so long, he forgot about that top step.”

Joey spotted his friends in Pete’s box and waved.

“What happened, Joey?” Lauren yelled. “We can’t see.” “He tripped!” Then the young star bent down and helped Forsythe to his feet.

Lauren covered her mouth. She didn’t want Pete to see that she was laughing, too. Blushing a bright crimson, he shrugged, grinned boyishly, and blew her a kiss. Then he scooped his blue cap off the ground and saluted the fans. Their reaction was roaring admiration for a returning if slightly klutzy idol. Lauren sighed. She didn’t mind sharing him for a little while.

“Is there a doctor in the house, Pete?” said the announcer. *“Or don’tcha need one?”*

Pete flagged the press box with his hat, set the cap over his blond curls, and backed carefully into line with Joey. The cheering went on.

“Then let’s play ball!” cried the announcer.

The Yankees took the field first, with Pete at his familiar third-base position. He tossed a warm-up ball to Joey, who fired it across the infield to first base.

“What’s with playing shortstop, Joey?” said Pete as he bent in a limbering stretch. The tightness in his thighs warned him this *could* be a mistake.

“When I heard you were playin’, I just wanted to be able to talk to you more,” Joey grinned. “It’s good to have you back, buddy.”

“You sure you’re not in here to cover up for me, kid?” Pete accused good-naturedly.

Joey curled his thumb and finger in the OK signal. “You’re not gonna need any covering for, Pete.”

“Huh! We’ll see about that. But, you know, it feels so damn good to be out here, I don’t even care how I do.”

Well, that's not entirely true—•/ do care a little, he admitted to himself.

Then he saw the first batter ambling to the plate, and he felt the color drain from his face and his palms begin to sweat. “Oh, no,” he moaned. “Not Popeye Malloy.”

The player’s given name was Matthew—a mobile mountain who got his nickname because of biceps roughly the size and shape of pickle barrels. He was a right-handed hitter, and he took loose practice swings with a bat that looked like it could double as a telephone pole. Each swing ended with the bat pointing directly at Pete Forsythe.

Pete swallowed, trying to raise some saliva into a mouth suddenly gone dry as the Saudi Arabian desert he’d crossed a week before. “Does Popeye still hit down third base?” he croaked.

“Dead on.”

“Wonderful. ...”

Lowering into a crouch, Pete set himself, elbows leaning lightly on his knees. The pitcher, a wiry veteran named Ron Guidry, started his windup. He was a lefty, and his back was toward Pete. Guidry’s arm cocked, then whipped toward home and the catcher’s mitt.

The fastball never got there. Popeye Malloy’s bat swung ferociously and smacked a sizzling liner toward the hole between Pete and Joey. Joey twisted back, playing it safe and giving himself an extra second to try to reach the low drive.

But Pete’s instincts had already trampled his fears. He was diving, flying flat out, parallel to the ground, gloved right hand reaching across his body. The ball slammed into the leather pocket and Pete landed on his belly, skidding painfully on the dirt, the wind knocked out of his gut.

But he still had the ball, and he held it up triumphantly as the umpire bellowed, “*Ooooouuut!*” Pete casually flipped the ball to Joey and sat on the ground for a moment to regain his breath. Popeye Malloy trotted across the infield grass en route to his bench.

“Forsythe, you little shit, ” he said; a sly grin on his meaty face. “Good to see you back.”

“Thanks, Popeye.”

Slowly, Pete got to his feet and moved back toward the base. The ball park was rocking, the organist stirring the place with the familiar chords of the “Charge” theme.

It all felt *great*—digging his spikes into the rich dirt of the infield, hearing the musical cacophony of the fans and the flapping of the pennants from the top rim of the upper deck, smelling the fresh-mown grass. He basked in all the comfortable sensations and in recollections from the old days. It was almost enough to make him forget all about starships and lasers, Visitors and war.

Almost . . .